STEAM PAST

South West Railwayman

Donald King

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Donald King

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Preface

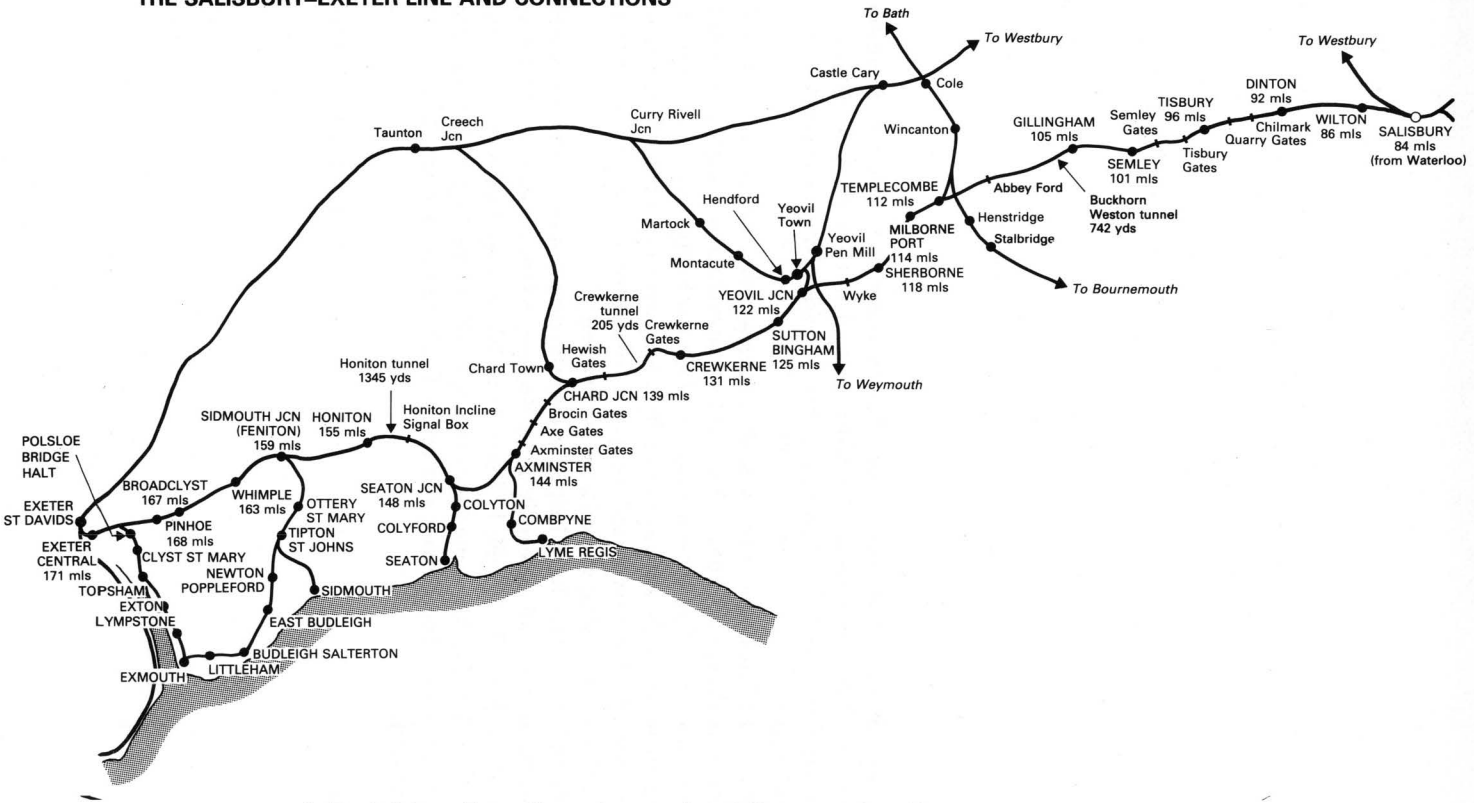
If you talk to anyone about railways, more often than not they will only mention steam locomotives. Ask them about the work carried out by porters, shunters, signalmen and relief men, and the chances are that you will always receive the same answer – 'I don't know.'

Although much of what I have written is an autobiography, I hope the book will also bring to life something of the past. Many older railwaymen will perhaps feel like laughing, for my story may jog their memories of similar happenings. The thirteen or so years I spent on the railway was not really a long service, much shorter than many of my friends who had completed something like thirty or forty years. It is to them I give my thanks in having shared a great experience.

Many friends and colleagues have helped me in the preparation of the book and I should like to thank them all especially John Brewer, editor of *Railway Modeller*; Mark Brittain; R. S. Joby; T. Fragel; F. Pike; Tom Woodman; Grenville Morgan; C. Maggs; P. Paye; Ted Gosling, one time curator of the Lyme Regis Museum; the Signalling Record Society; Mike Esau; and my wife Sheila for spending long hours typing the manuscript.

Seaton, Devon
April 1982

DONALD KING



I. The Salisbury–Exeter line and connections. Mileages are from Waterloo.

I
The Axminster Porter

I decided to move from London to the West Country after receiving an assurance that I would find employment as a general clerk, but discovered this not to be the case. The only vacancy at that time was for a porter at Axminster station. I accepted this as a temporary measure, although it was not long before railways captured my enthusiasm, encouraged by the late Inspector Ted Tolley, BEM, of Templecombe, who suggested that I should study the rules and regulations and attend classes covering signalling and office procedures. In addition, I was advised to join the railway division of the St John Ambulance Association.

On the morning of 5 March 1955 I started work, and recall having to get up at 2.30 am to cycle the seven miles from Seaton to Axminster in order to be there by 4 am. The first duty was to open the main doors of the station to let in the gang of W. H. Smith and Surridge Dawson newspaper sorters from Exeter and Axminster. Both groups would set about erecting trestles in the main hallway and in the ladies waiting room. Then we waited for the 1.15 am Waterloo–Exeter newspaper and passenger train which arrived at 4.20 am each workday morning. The sorters' primary function was to receive the 56-lb bundles of newsprint from the train, then sort and dispatch them to all the newsagents from Charmouth to Exmouth. The poor old porter had the job of actually unloading the newsprint and only on very rare occasions, such as the late arrival of the train, would he receive any help in the back-breaking task of trying to offload something like 1½ tons in the space of four minutes. By 4.25 am the train was usually on its way to Exeter. The porter's next duty was to walk down to the yard to open up the main gates and doors to the goods yard and shed.

By this time an up freight train would have made its way in from Exeter. Three box wagons containing various types of parcel traffic were detached and left in the down siding, to be sorted later by the shed crew. While the porter was occupied with the shunting two men from the engineer's department appeared on the scene to tap each wagon wheel and feel each axle box with the back of the hand for excessive heat and provide attention if required. Occasionally the porter would be asked to detach what is known as a 'NOT TO GO' wagon – a description given to a wagon with a hot axle box. Sometimes other faults developed such as a lost brake shoe, fractures to the wooden or metal structure, or a shifted load.

The freight train engine returned from the down goods yard to the up line by way of the crossovers, was reversed onto its train and on its way by 4.45 am, stopping at each station as far as Yeovil Junction. There it was shunted to allow the first up passenger train from Exeter to Waterloo to pass.

A short break followed until 5.20 am when

1. A selection of badges and equipment collected by the author during his railway service.

G. A. & M. W. Byrne-Jones

the 10.40 pm Nine Elms–Exmouth Junction freight arrived. Wagon loads of coal that came from Wales and the Midlands had to be detached, and again there was an inspection of the wagons. By 6 am the early turn porter would be finished in the down yard and have returned to the station to clean up the mess left by the newspaper sorters. There was only a matter of some fifteen minutes or so to do this job, but on the days of high winds and torrential rain it could take a good half hour to pick up the soggy wrapping paper and pieces of string which had found their way onto the track within the station precincts. Half past six would see the arrival of the shunter, who lived in one of the railway cottages.

It was now that the early turn porter could usually put the kettle on for a well-earned cup of tea, before remaking the fires in the up and

W. Philip Conolly

2. An evening up Exeter–Waterloo train at Axminster. A Bulleid Battle of Britain Pacific takes on water, giving relatives and friends an extra few minutes to say their goodbyes.

down waiting rooms and main booking hall, during the winter months.

Just before the arrival of the 6.20 am Yeovil Town–Ilfracombe at 7.06 am, and the 6.30 am Exeter Central–Waterloo at 7.19 am, I would try and persuade a passenger to let me carry his or her luggage. If lucky there might be two or three passengers and this would mean using a barrow. In the 1950s I made as much as 10s (50p) in tips from one train, supplementing my wages which averaged approximately £7 per week.

The down 6.20 am Yeovil–Ilfracombe, the first passenger train of the day, was usually made up of five coaches and several box vans, and we were allowed seven minutes to unload the parcels traffic.

One morning, with the rain belting down and a strong wind blowing from the west, I thought I had had my chips. To prevent myself from getting too wet I had put on my raincoat and wellington boots and had just finished loading parcels onto a barrow, when turning in the wrong direction at the platform's edge while coming out of the box van, I slipped and fell down on the track. For a few seconds I was panic-stricken as I heard the doors being closed

W. Philip Conolly

3. A down train calls at Axminster, behind West Country Pacific no. 34104, 'Bere Alston'. The water tower and a Lyme Regis branch loco coal wagon can be seen on the far left with oil lighting on the platform.

and the guard pass above me as he walked back to his compartment on the train. In falling I had not only struck my chin but landed on my back on the rail nearest the platform. I know I cried out aloud as I looked at the wheels to the front and rear of me. Fortunately the guard heard my cries and pulled me up onto the platform.

Before the arrival of the 7.30 am Exeter–Waterloo at 8.05 am, a passenger train which left Exeter Central at 6.40 am, stopping at all stations, terminated at Axminster at 7.36 am. The engine was detached, ran round the train, was coupled to the other end and shunted from the up onto the down line. We offloaded parcels and the train was then shunted to the down siding. During the morning the engine was sent to Seaton Junction to shunt there, and returned in time to work the 1.55 pm Axminster–Exeter stopping train.

The one and only time I helped with this turn I caused a delay to the following 7.30 am Exeter up train by breaking the vacuum pipes between the engine and the carriage stock before the driver agreed to the move. I lost a rubber sealing ring which was attached to the engine's vacuum pipe and had to scrabble about beneath the leading carriage, taking about ten minutes to find it. I wasn't popular with that driver!

It was usual to take the late morning mail and several boxes of fish from Mevagissey from the

W. Philip Conolly

4. A double-headed down train leaving Axminster, with T9 4–4–0 no. 30719 and an unidentified S15 4–6–0. This four-coach local hardly needed such power, but it is likely that the T9 was working back to Exmouth Junction loco shed.

7.30 am Exeter–Waterloo, which arrived at Axminster at 8.05 am. There followed a 20-minute break, and then it was time to sweep out the ladies waiting room, general waiting room, main booking hall, stationmaster's office and the toilets on the down platform. The up platform also had its waiting room which had to be done out daily.

Around 8 am the stationmaster would arrive on the scene. More often than not he would have a little chit-chat with each of his staff, including a walk to the end of the down platform to speak to the signalman on duty. When he left the signal-box he went across to the goods shed for his weekday inspections and walk around the yard. During the morning he would take the overnight booking office cash to the local bank and try to foster new business by visiting the local traders. Mid-morning would see the arrivals and departures of two passenger trains, the up 8.46 am Exeter–Salisbury at 9.43 am, and the 8.08 am Salisbury–Ilfracombe at 10.24 am.

Sometimes we caused a delay by carrying a passenger's luggage, finding him or her a seat, and receiving our weasel (money) for the help given. The stationmaster would nag like mad unless the person was elderly or infirm – he didn't like filling in the delay forms attributable to the porters.

Having done the station cleaning, handled the departure of the two trains by 10.30 am, the next duty was to go to the oil shed to change the signal and ground signal disc lamps. Ten signal lamps and eight ground disc lamps were kept as weekly replacements.

On Monday mornings I walked out along the line to the up distant signal with a clean lamp. When the lamp was alight and inserted into the

R. C. Riley

5. The Lyme Regis branch bay at Axminster with Adams 4–4–2T no. 30582 about to run round its single-coach train. In the foreground are the allotments used by local railway staff, and in the background the world famous Axminster carpet factory.

holding pit it would heat an ether rod which in turn gave off an electric impulse. This travelled along a wire to an indicator in the signal-box, which gave a reading of 'in' or 'out'. These repeater lamps, as they were known, were installed in each of the signals out of sight of the box.

On Tuesdays I walked in the direction of Chard Junction to the down distant signal, 2,119 yards from Axminster signal-box. Five hundred yards along the route the porter would call in at Axminster Gates where three lamps were kept in the oil shed. One was for the up advanced starting signal, the second was for the down outer home signal, and the third was taken out to the down distant signal. I don't think any porter minded changing the lamps on a nice sunny day, but even now I wonder what those lads used to say when they put a match to the wick, after climbing maybe 20 to 30 feet up the signal ladder, and were just about to make the changeover when, dammit, the thing went out! For myself, I would often put on a raincoat and then be seen perched up at the top, trying to relight the lamp with the wind blowing all around me, using the coat as a shield.

Wednesday's walk was 1,241 yards out to the Lyme Regis branch distant signal. On returning I changed the branch home signal, ground shunt limit indicator and ground discs. Thursday was the day to cover all the signals and ground discs (nicknamed 'dollies') within the station limits. Then on Friday the time would be devoted to whitening the platform edges and to cleaning the many windows of the station and the foot-bridge from the down to the up platforms.

6. The branch terminus at Seaton in 1952 with M7 no. 30021 leaving with the 6.10 pm train to Seaton Junction. Note the typical SR concrete lamp supports and lattice post starting signals.

F. R. Hebron, Rail Archive Stephenson

This work was carried on until the arrival of the 11.12 am Exeter–Salisbury train which, during the summer months, would have one through coach attached to it from Lyme Regis to Waterloo. One had to keep a sharp eye for the passenger who wanted his luggage carried, as our leading porter was – or thought he was – a wily old bird. He would nip out of the parcels office at the last second to make a kill. I can remember him bringing out his little black book and saying his tips were down for that year, but little did he ever know that the shunter, the junior porter and myself had organised ourselves so well; with the arrival of a train, whenever possible, the yard shunter would position himself forward, the junior porter to the centre of the platform, and myself to the rear. This left the leading porter with the job of unloading the train's parcel van which was, after all, his proper job. One task we used to have fun with was manoeuvring two 20-gallon milk churns simultaneously!

Any porter who could do this, and keep them spinning for 10 to 15 yards instead of having to

Donald King

7. Colyford station in the early 1960s when the plants (in white painted tyres!) were still well looked after. Note also the immaculate white platform edge.

hump them onto a barrow, would save a lot of sweat.

The 9 am Waterloo down train would arrive at Axminster at 12.22 pm, usually with eleven coaches. The 11 am from Waterloo, the 'Atlantic Coast Express', would detach five coaches at Salisbury, the first portion going fast to Sidmouth Junction. The second portion was a slow train to Exeter arriving at 2.31 pm. The second portion of the 3 pm from Waterloo would arrive at Axminster at 6.41 pm and continue to Exeter as a three-coach train. The 6 pm from Waterloo would travel to Exeter complete. It is interesting to note that in 1955 on Fridays and Saturdays only the 6 pm, which stopped at Axminster at 9.18 pm, was met by the Seaton Junction–Seaton branch train, which eventually arrived back at Seaton at 9.55 pm.

Following the early turn shift, two porters were booked to cover the afternoon and evening. The first came on at 1.30 pm. This would allow time for the early turn man to finish half an hour later. Coming on at this time, he could handle any of the parcels taken off the 11 am Plymouth–Brighton passenger train at 1.34 pm, and cover for the leading porter for the hour when he had his break. At 2 pm the second porter would begin work and do platform duties. This released the 1.30 pm man to walk out to the Axminster Gates to cover there for two hours, and relieve the gatemen who worked from 6 am until 2 pm, or 4 pm until midnight. The 2 pm man would also take up the

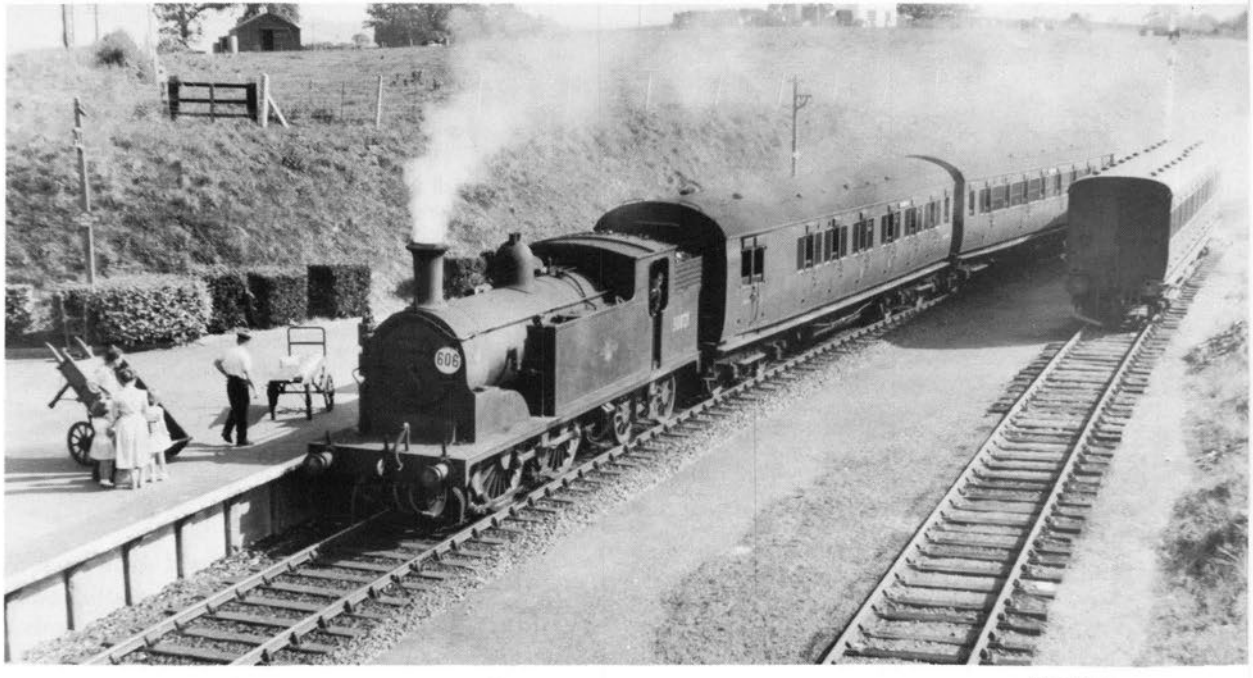
R. C. Riley

8. During Western Region control a two-coach push-pull train with 0–6–0PT no. 6430 leaves Colyton bound for Seaton Junction. This was very near to the complete closure of the branch.

duty of the yard shunter, which involved sorting out and labelling up empty coal wagons and box vans. An up freight train, the 1.58 pm from Exmouth Junction, would arrive between 2.30 and 3.30 pm each weekday to take these on to Yeovil Junction and Templecombe for sorting and forwarding to their destinations.

While this activity was taking place during the afternoon, the leading porter, having returned from lunch, would have his time cut out handling the Axminster carpets. The fellows working in the goods shed would be busy loading the carpets into as many as five box vans, for the Axminster carpet factory was only 400 yards or so away from the station. It was a mammoth task each afternoon, when these same wagons were brought out from the goods shed and the down siding. Usually, after the departure of the 2.31 pm down train, and before the passing of the through 1 pm from Waterloo, the freight train engine would bring the wagons out of the down yard and propel them back to the down platform. This allowed room in the down yard for the engine to shunt out the other loaded box vans and various empty wagons. In addition, a number of wagons had to be in position for attachment to the down Templecombe freight between 8 and 9 pm each workday evening.

From 3 o'clock until 4.30 lorry after lorry load of carpets would arrive at the parcels office door for dispatch at the Company's special rate. With the help of the van drivers the carpets would be taken from the vehicles and inspected individually. The next thing was to look at the destination labels so that each carpet could be given an area distribution code number. The weight was always clearly marked. The amount was recorded and a charge label was stuck to each one. It was not the weight of the larger carpets that used to be a bother, nor their diameter, but so many of them were anything from 10 to 15 feet in length. One had to be very careful to see that they did not bend in the middle because the wrapping could so easily be split when handled.



9. The branch train arrives at Seaton Junction behind M7 no. 30021 in September 1959.

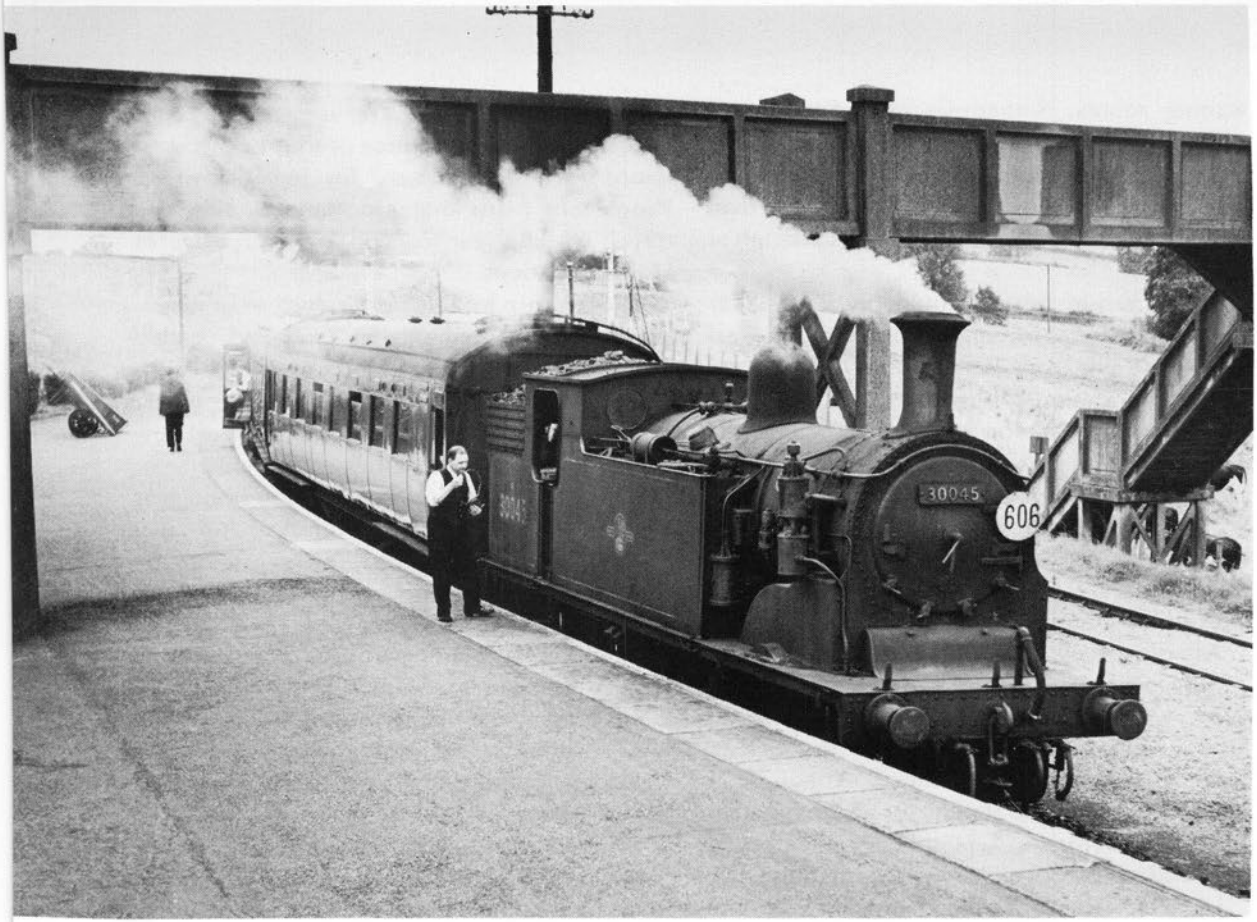
Derek Cross

As many of the carpets as possible would be loaded into the wagons until about 4 pm when the doors were closed and sealed and taken back to the yard for dispatch later. The remaining carpets would be carried by any up or down passenger train later in the day. They were the smaller ones that could be loaded onto the station barrows.

At 4.15 pm the 1.30 pm man returned from Axminster Gates to work on the station, and the 2 pm porter would have finished the afternoon shunting by 5.00 pm. The up freight train which arrived at Axminster between 2.30 pm and 3.30 pm departed at 5.10 pm and work for the rest of the late turn duties eased off just a little.

The two mid-afternoon trains, the through coaches from the 11 am from Waterloo at 2.31 pm and the 2.30 pm Exeter–Waterloo at 3.13 pm, were handled by the leading porter and the stationmaster. If one was on the platform shunting they would try and outdo the leading porter for a shilling or two. I have often wondered if I had a friendly disposition, or whether I was a bad shunter, as it was surprising the number of guards who would take hold of my shunt pole and send me off to the engineer's shed to brew up the tea, along with either the driver or fireman of the afternoon freight train.

Up to now I have made no mention of the Axminster–Lyme Regis branch line, which was locally named the 'Bluebell Line' (like the railway in Sussex), for its banks between Axminster and Combpyne were carpeted with bluebells for over two miles. When the branch train arrived some minutes before the main line train, the driver would hand the tablet to the signalman in the Axminster signal-box, who would put it



W. Philip Conolly

10. Another arrival from Seaton behind M7 no. 30045. The signalman is taking the tablet from the driver.

into the electric tablet machine and exchange bell signals with the Lyme Regis signal-box to free the locking mechanism. This enabled the branch engine to be detached and run round its train for the return trip, and it could also go into the up siding and out onto the main line if required. Whoever was on platform duty was responsible for receiving the tablet, but as so often happened the driver or fireman would do this for us.

Two trains arrived around 6.30 pm, the first being the 5.53 pm Exeter–Waterloo at 6.37 pm and the other was the 5.39 pm from Templecombe at 6.41 pm. It was the time of day when the GPO would come onto the station with a whole load of mail. There were as many as three barrow loads for both trains, and in addition to this there was the parcels traffic which the porters would put into the guard's van. After the two trains had departed the barrows were put back into the storage space, and the branch line train was sent on its way to Lyme Regis. It was then the usual routine to make a dive for the porters' room and on would go the kettle.

In the time left after the main passenger trains of the day had gone, having had our tea, we then devoted our time to sweeping the platforms and

waiting rooms. Sometimes one of us would walk or cycle up to the fish and chip shop, otherwise we would natter until the arrival of the branch train at 8.43 pm and 7.50 pm Exeter mail and passenger train to Waterloo via Eastleigh at 8.46 pm.

The 1.30 pm porter would be on his way home at 9.30 pm, leaving the 2 pm man to deal with the 6 pm from Waterloo at 9.18 pm and turn off the station gas lighting.

By 10 pm the station would be closed for the day. All would be in total darkness except for the glow of the signals and the signal-box lights as the last man made his way home. Axminster box was classed as a 24-hour box, although it did close at 11 pm on a Saturday night until 9.30 am on a Sunday morning each week.

After working as a porter for two years on Axminster station, from March 1955 to May 1957, I made an application for the post of leading porter at Colyford, on the Seaton Junction–Seaton branch line. Although I worked on this little station for approximately four months (May to September 1957), I would say I had a less exciting time than at Axminster.

I had to start work at 8.30 am each workday morning, and during the summer working timetable there was extra duty on both Saturdays and Sundays. By listening to a relay bell, linked to the electric tablet instrument at Seaton and Seaton Junction, the leading porter could time it to position the level crossing across the road for the passing of the trains – these gates spanned the A3052 Lyme Regis–Exeter road.

In contrast to the volume of traffic at Axminster, generally no more than a dozen parcels and boxes of fish were handled in any one week at Colyford. As far as passengers were concerned only about three or four tickets were issued each day, mostly for local journeys. People who made longer journeys would either travel by bus, car or taxi to Axminster or Honiton stations.

The late turn leading porter, instead of spending his first two hours at Colyford, would travel to the next station, Colyton, to take up his duty there. This was to help the leading porter there to load three or four box vans with cow hides and wooden domestic appliances.

The only exciting thing to happen to me was on an evening when the river Axe and river Coly, which join a short distance from the station, flooded. Keeping an eye on the rising water as the evening light faded, I realised that I would not be able to get home on my cycle as the road outside was already impassable. After the passing of the last passenger train to Seaton which had to travel through the flood, since water was by now covering the railway line, I 'phoned Train Control at Exeter. We came to an arrangement with the signalman and engine crew, and I was rescued by their sending out a light engine. Once back at Seaton I was able to walk home.

With my growing interest in railways, brought about by visiting steam enthusiasts to the West Country, I grasped the opportunity of applying for the vacancy of a class 4 signalman on the Lyme Regis–Axminster branch line, which was one of the most beautiful in the country. Fortunately, I was accepted from a short list of several applicants, and began working at Lyme Regis in September 1957.

2
The Lyme Signalman

On the strength of my promotion to signalman, I purchased a BSA Bantam 125 cc motor cycle, an improvement on my previous mode of transport – a bicycle – so that the journey by road from Seaton to Lyme Regis was made much easier.

When I drew up at the branch line terminus on my first morning, I could hear the sound of an Adams Radial 4–4–2 tank engine blowing off steam and, entering by one of the two side gates, I was met by a relief signalman, who for six weeks would be helping me to learn the station and signal-box working. He had already opened up the station doors, and introduced me to the Tyers No. 6 Instrument which was housed in the main booking office. The station staff consisted of stationmaster, 2 signalmen, 1 goods porter, 2 engine drivers, 2 firemen, 1 engine cleaner and 1 van driver.

On a typical working day an engine was kept at Lyme Regis overnight, its firebox emptied of ashes ready to be relit during the small hours by a permanent cleaner named Arthur. (The fire was allowed to die so that the clinker could be completely removed and the firebars checked regularly for wear.) When the bunker was replenished with coal and the tanks filled with water, the engine would be ready for duty by 6 am. At this time the early turn driver and fireman, together with the signalman, would report for duty.

In order to open a signal-box for its period of operation, the signalman at each end of a section must exchange the opening block bell signals, in this case to Axminster, 5 pause 5 pause 5 beats, which would then be acknowledged. The signalman at Lyme would send the code 4 pause 1 – this allowed the light engine to travel over the branch line, departing at 6.15 am. Acknowledging this, the signalman at Axminster would keep the bell plunger pressed in and allow the Lyme signalman to turn the commutator to the left, pull out the slide and withdraw the tablet for the branch main line.

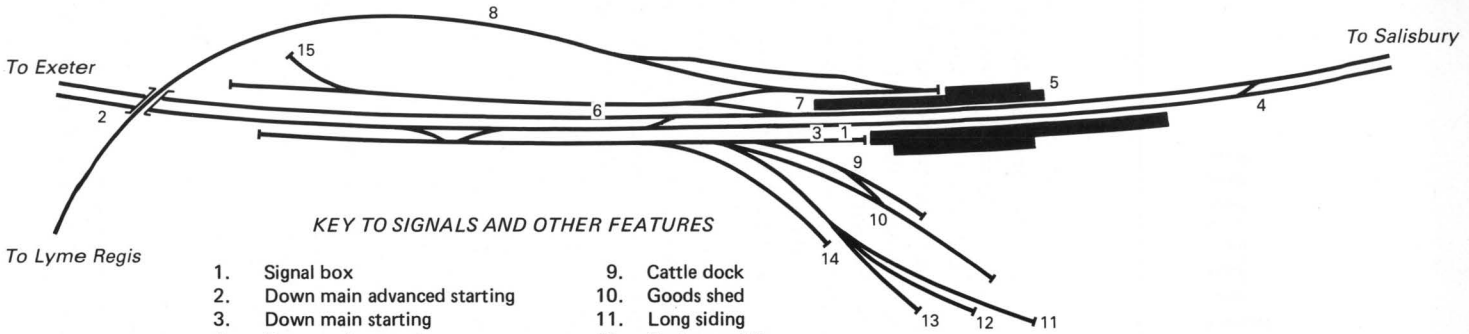
The tablet was then put into a leather pouch and handed to the driver. As the withdrawal of the tablet also freed the signal frame, unlocking the leading signal, the signalman was able to pull the yard to branch main line points lever, thus allowing the light engine to proceed to Axminster. The bell signal, 2 beats 'train entering section', was sent and acknowledged by Axminster.

The journey usually took about 20 minutes, and once at Axminster the signalman would take charge of the tablet, letting the engine off the branch line to work the down yard until 7.30 am and prepare the Lyme goods.

At Lyme Regis the remaining coaching stock would have been cleaned by 7.45 am, followed by the stationmaster's office, waiting room and porters' room. These jobs were carried out as the morning progressed. The station signal-box also had to be attended to, with the lever

AXMINSTER AND LYME REGIS STATION TRACK PLANS (1950s)

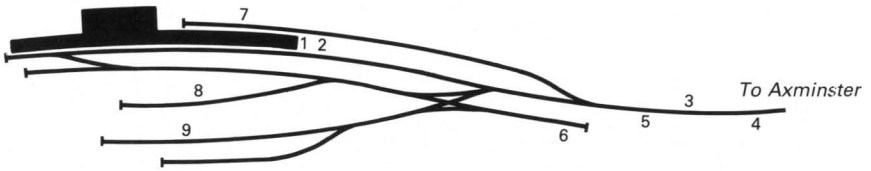
AXMINSTER



KEY TO SIGNALS AND OTHER FEATURES

1. Signal box
2. Down main advanced starting
3. Down main starting
4. Down main outer home
5. Up main starting
6. Up main home
7. Branch starting
8. Branch home
9. Cattle dock
10. Goods shed
11. Long siding
12. Engineers siding
13. Coal siding
14. Petrol siding
15. Permanent way siding

LYME REGIS



KEY TO SIGNALS AND OTHER FEATURES

1. Signal box
2. Platform starting signal
3. Up advanced starting signal
4. Fixed down distant signal
5. Down home signal
6. Engine shed
7. Cattle dock
8. Goods shed
9. Coal bunkers

II. Axminster and Lyme Regis track layouts in the 1950s.

BRITISH RAILWAYS
SIGNALLING AND RULES CLASSES
LOCAL EXAMINATIONS 1958 - 59
This is to Certify that Mr. D. S. KING has
passed the Signalling Advanced A Examination held at
EXETER CENTRAL
Operating Officer
SOUTHERN REGION

11. The author's 'Signalling Advanced A Examination' Certificate.

frame handles always highly polished and the windows cleaned at least once a week.

Before the goods train was due to leave Axminster at 7.35 am, the leading porter at Combpyne would telephone to discover the number of wagons to come off the train and say whether he had anything to add to it. The gradient from Axminster on its approach to Combpyne Halt was a very steep 1 in 88 and levelled out to 1 in 200 only a short distance from the platform. The summit of the line reached 470 feet above sea level before descending at 1 in 40 in the direction of Lyme Regis. Therefore it was safer to shunt on the downward journey with a freight train or part thereof standing on the running line.

Combpyne did at one time have a signal-box – from 1907 until 12 August 1921 – and four levers were left in working order until an open two-lever frame was brought into use on 17 June 1930.

Before the arrival of the goods train at Lyme the points were set for the platform and buffers, and the train stopped at the home signal. The brakes were pinned down on two or three wagons by the guard, likewise the brake of his van. The fireman then uncoupled the engine, the signalman changed the points and lowered the ground signal disc.

D. M. C. Hepburne-Scott, Rail Archive Stephenson

12. Adams Radial 4–4–2T no. 30584 on arrival at Lyme Regis in April 1960. Coal was still being handled, and the simple wooden station building (now on the Mid-Hants line at Alresford) is in immaculate condition.

The engine moved onto the coaching stock in the bay road, the ground signal disc returned to normal and the points changed, main line to goods siding. The brakes would be released on the wagons and brake van and the train allowed to enter the terminus by gravity. On the face of it it would seem a very odd way to allow a goods train to enter a downhill terminus, but there was a very good reason for it, bearing in mind that the gradient into Lyme Regis was 1 in 40, easing to 1 in 66 just before the station. With the freight in the goods yard and the engine attached to the coaching stock in the bay road, it could do a shunt movement into the goods yard, pick up the outgoing wagons first, then the brake van and bring the whole train out onto the running line. Propelled back to the platform, it formed a mixed train due to depart at 8.11 am.

When he had checked that the tail lamp was on the brake van the signalman, taking possession of the tablet, would remove it from the pouch, place it in the machine and send the 'train out of section' signal, 2 pause 1. This acknowledged, he would then send the bell code, 3 pause 1, 'Is line clear for passenger train?', wait for the response, and withdraw another tablet for the 8.11 am train which arrived at Axminster 8.32 am.

Before the train departed, the stationmaster, Mr Arthur Causley, would come onto the platform to check that any parcels traffic – and churns of water for Combpyne – had been

13. No. 30584 'on shed' at Lyme Regis in July 1957. Note the heap of clinker on the right and the corrugated iron locomotive shed.

D. M. C. Hepburne-Scott, Rail Archive Stephenson

loaded, that all the doors were closed and secure, that the platform starting, and leading advance starting signal were in the 'off' position, and that the train left on time.

When the 'train entering section' signal had been sent and acknowledged the signalman, after seeing the train pass the two signals, would return them to the 'on' position before crossing back to the station to lend a hand in the goods shed.

Although the station working timetable showed timing for a freight train out to Axminster in 1957–8 it never ran. Instead the 8.11 am mixed train was used during the winter months. In the summer of 1958 the wagons were attached to the first or second passenger train out from Lyme. On arrival at Axminster a shunt movement was made from the branch line to the up siding and the wagons detached. With the arrival back at Axminster of the light engine from Seaton Junction, which would work the 1.55 pm Axminster–Exeter Central passenger train, the wagons would be attached to this engine and transferred to the down siding yard.

After the 8.43 am passenger train had arrived back at 9.04 am, it only remained to help passengers disembark with their luggage or catch the departing trains, book in any parcels, but most of all, to look busy! When the clock showed 2 pm it was smiles all round as the shift ended and the staff climbed onto their old Hercules roadsters and pedalled off home.

The late turn signalman, starting at 1.30 pm, had more or less the same duties as the early turn signalman, with the exception of the general cleaning. At the end of the day, however, he

was required to sweep the platform from end to end and clear the litter bins before the arrival of the last train at 9.16 pm. The engine was detached, ran round, and shunted the stock into the bay road for the night. After this the engine retired to the shed, the tablet was returned to the instrument, and 'train out of section' given to Axminster and acknowledged. Finally, the closing signals, 7 pause 5 pause 5, were exchanged and the box closed for the night.

While the day to day workings on the branch line are imprinted on my mind, I also remember some of the more amusing episodes that happened in the four years I was at Lyme Regis until September 1961.

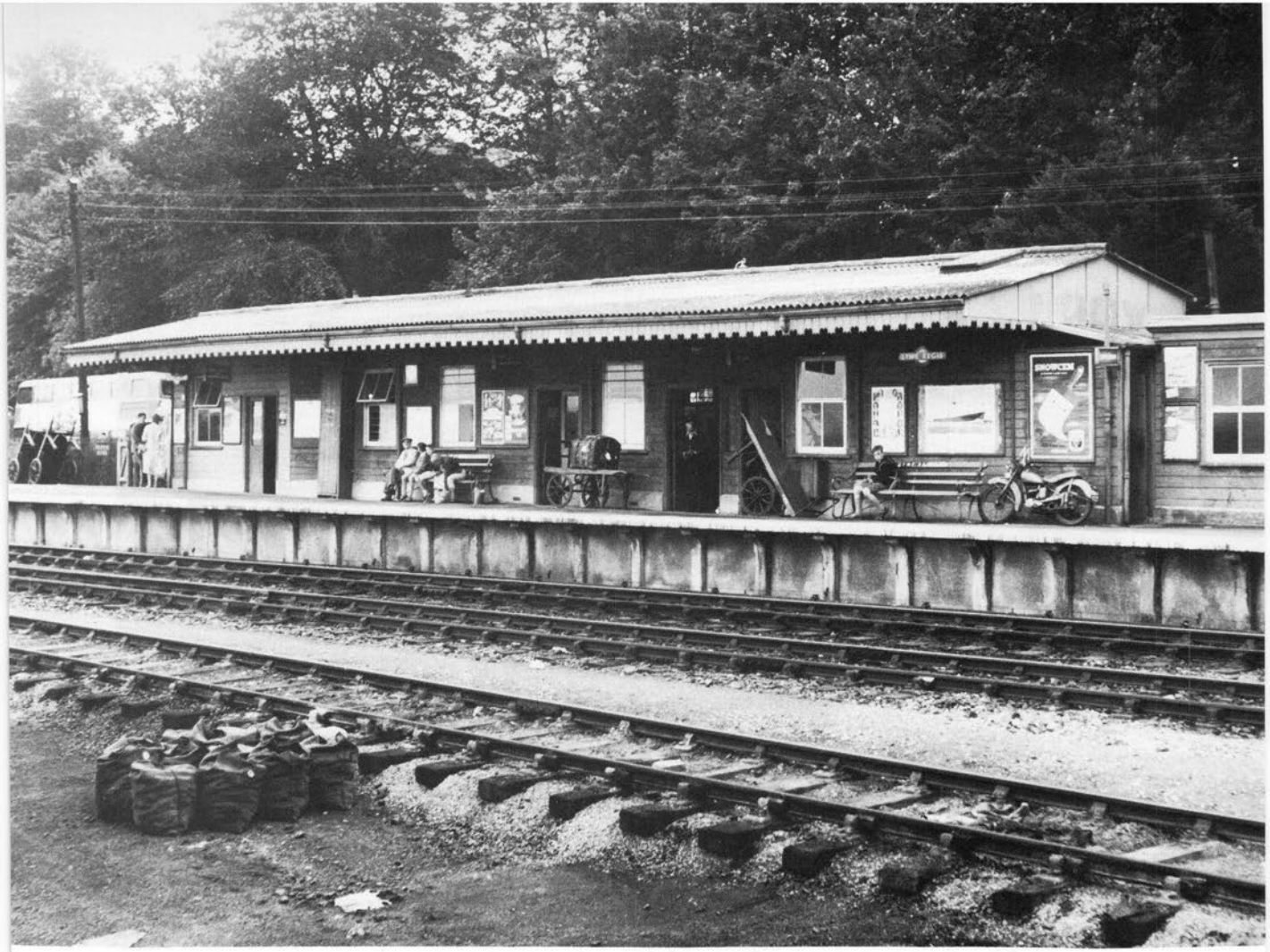
During one evening, around 8.30 pm in September 1957, I was working in the ticket office, checking the days takings against the register, when the telephone rang – before 8 am and after 5 pm the signalman had the responsibility of issuing tickets and answering inquiries concerning bookings. I did not know the weather outside had turned to thunder and, picking up the telephone, I must have stood rigid for at least a minute as a flash of lightning, causing an electrical charge from the ear-piece, travelled across to the tablet instrument beside me. Even now I can remember thanking the good Lord for such a lucky escape!

Strange to say that the Tyers No. 6 Instrument was housed in the booking office and not in the signal-box. It would seem normal for all the signalling arrangements to be housed in the one box. However, as long ago as 1930, it was decided to make this alteration so that the then porter/signalman could help with the parcel collection and dispatch side of the working, thus assisting with unloading and loading of passenger requirements for each train. It was some years later that the term 'porter' was dropped from the signalman's grade. With the decline in passenger and freight handling two porters were no longer required, and in their place one goods porter was used.

In the same office we had a trainee booking clerk, and at one time a mystery arose as to why, on some days, we were a pound down in the till. It was only when I was in the office waiting to acknowledge the 'train out of section' signal from Axminster, that I became aware of the trainee issuing a ticket to a young lad. What was happening became very plain when I noticed that instead of taking the pound note through the window, he was actually leaving it and pushing it back with the change to the customer, who may or may not have noticed the error!

With the return of the young lads from holiday, either as new entrants or old hands to Allhallows public school at Rousden, three miles from Lyme Regis, the station would see their luggage arrive by the box van load or passenger train. It was the procedure on arrival to weigh it for excess charge under the passenger 'Luggage in Advance' arrangement, and overweight cases were always put to one side in a shed next to the porter's room. I can remember the night when a party of schoolboys tried to keep me occupied in the office while a few others searched the luggage to take what they wanted in a hired car driven by an elderly gent.

Many local people knew of the Bullen family of Charmouth, and particularly Jane Bullen, the famous equestrian rider. A horse box arrived one afternoon at Lyme, the family awaiting its arrival. Lowering the side doors to release the horse, many efforts were made to encourage the animal to come out onto the cattle dock. Without warning, the horse reared, walloped one end of the van with its rear legs and swung out a few paces. I wouldn't have minded, but its right hind leg was planted firmly on my left foot! The result of this was that I had the nickname 'Hopalong' for a few days!



14. Waiting for the train! The author can be seen in the doorway of the Parcels Office, and his BSA Bantam is on the platform.

Mike Esau

One lovely summer evening a tent was erected in the cattle dock, a part of the station which had never really been used for years. Two girls had come off the 3 pm from Waterloo looking for summer work, and around 8 pm they came into the office. Having had little success and being stony-broke, they spoke of sleeping on the beach. However, I telephoned my opposite number, the early turn signalman, and we were able to accommodate the girls. Some weeks after that, one of them had to return home to London as an expectant mother, which confirms why all mothers and fathers get worried when their young daughters leave home or go on holiday without them!

One day a taxi arrived and I had to help unload an open-type packing case. Inside was a sheep. A dear old lady asked me nicely to be

15. The approach to Lyme Regis in later days, with an Ivatt 2–6–2T and single coach in the platform. The station is beginning to look a little run down with most of the signalling removed.

A. E. West

very careful as I put it in the parcels van of the train. I couldn't believe it when she said it was her pet and was taking it on holiday with her. She was quick to mention that other people took their pets, so why not hers!

An unbelievable but most certainly true event occurred one day when a lady purchased a ticket for Waterloo, and I personally saw her onto the 10 am train. No one was more surprised than I when I saw her still sitting in the train as it returned to Lyme. I explained that the winter service was in operation and only in the summer was a third coach attached to the 11.37 am on Mondays to Fridays for London. To make certain she would get to Waterloo I telephoned Axminster to see that she was put on a London train and not returned to Lyme Regis for the second time that day. By chance I was asked to do a couple of hours extra duty and was still working when the train arrived back at 1.59 pm with the lady again on board. I could not bring myself to face her so I left it to the booking clerk. It appeared that the person I had spoken to at Axminster had gone off duty without passing on the message. This book should really be dedicated to that poor lady whoever she was.

It is a pity that Mrs Brown who, along with her husband, drove two of the taxis serving Lyme Regis station, could not tell this story herself. While the train was stationary and filling up with passengers for the London train, Mrs Brown followed someone into the last coach, carrying their luggage. When departure time arrived I shut all the open doors, gave the right-away and watched the train moving out of the station. As it began to clear the platform I could see someone waving from the train and that it was Mrs Brown. Like a runner on a hundred yards sprint, I tried to make it to the signal-box at the end of the platform to drop the leading signal to the 'on' position. Too late – the train had already passed it and was heading out towards Combpyne. I was left with only one thing to do and that was to telephone Mr Brown and ask him to pick up a passenger at Combpyne station, but I did not tell him it was his wife!

We had more than a few laughs at the items brought into the cloakroom, such as the young lady who dashed in and asked me to put a ticket on the brassière she was waving in her hand. Then there was the man who packed away his false teeth in a suitcase and whose wife nagged him because of the terrible sound he made trying to talk. They searched all through the cases for the teeth without success. Later his wife came to apologise for her husband who had found them wrapped up in his handkerchief, and they fell onto the platform as he was about to blow his nose!

How many of you remember the onion sellers from Brittany? One would come to Lyme Regis each year, his bicycle loaded with strings of onions, and each time he would try and pick out the biggest to give me. I can remember him saying his trade would be coming to an end as the family was dying out, but I was very excited to see him on television a few years ago, and often wonder what he is doing for a living now.

There was no limit to the variety of jobs we were asked to do. One day a man and woman entered the office and asked if I would mind their five children, while they nipped across to the Victoria Hotel for a drink.

At one time we started brewing tea in the porters' room to sell to the passengers, though this didn't go down very well with the station-master. Unknown to him we then started on bottled orange and lemon squash, until someone opened his mouth and the lads were on the carpet again. Once, Mr Causley, the station-master, picked up an elderly lady's suitcase to help her onto the train. It was a laugh to see him making futile attempts to refuse a tip, and then the guilty look on his face as he surreptitiously slipped the coin into his trouser pocket.

A row would often break out among the taxi drivers outside the station as strangers would muscle in and try to pick up passengers. It was most unfair to the four people who held licences to ply for hire, and we tried hard to see that these outsiders never got the fares.

Turning now to some of the 'clangers' that befell the railway staff at Lyme, the first happened a few days after I had taken up my new position as a signalman and just before the guards were taken off branch line trains in October 1957 – provided trains did not exceed three coaches. On that occasion Tom Bird, a guard, had to pay for a taxi out to Axminster after being left behind. It was thought that Tom was on the train, although he had not actually blown his whistle or waved his flag. Instead, he was in the porters' room drinking tea!

Then there was the time when my opposite number for the day handed the driver what he thought was the tablet in the pouch, but returning to the office he noticed that the tablet was still in the drawer of the instrument. It was obvious the driver or fireman had not checked.

In a flash he was on his motor cycle racing to Axminster where he managed to beat the train. Unluckily for him, though, it was the day the inspector was paying a visit.

The biggest blunder occurred one weekday in the summer, when the goods porter had the job of attaching a third coach to the two set in the bay road. The bay road had a platform, facing points with locking gear and a ground signal disc. A movement was allowed out onto the running line as the leading signal to the section ahead could be pulled to the 'off' position. However, no one had checked to see if the coupling up had been done properly, and when the train departed on time for Axminster the third coach stood firmly rooted where it was, with passengers staring from the windows. Taxis were ordered for all concerned, but it caused a 35-minute delay to the connecting Exeter–Brighton train at Axminster.

It would be hard to forget the day when I was cleaning the brassware in the gentleman's toilet and the ball in the cistern ceased to float; at that moment I was working with the polishing cloth and Brasso. Without warning the water started to pour out over the top of the cistern and I was soaked from head to toe. Since I had no change of clothing, I borrowed a raincoat and after doing a striptease act spent the morning hiding from each and every person who showed their face at the counter. To help me out of my predicament, the booking clerk looked after the train tablet while the stationmaster took charge of the signal-box.

On the freight side, we often had a box wagon for a gentleman named Hayball. The regular staff were used to receiving such consignments, but on this particular day in July 1960 we had a relief goods porter to do the shunting and help the van driver. Without thinking he took out the inward label from the clip-holder with Mr Hayball's name on it, made out a new one without checking to see if the wagon was empty or not, and attached it to the outgoing mixed freight train for one of the main central freight wagon depots (oddly enough named Hayball) marked empty.

The next day Mr Hayball came storming into the office wanting to know where his wagon was. To cut a long story short, it took three days to trace the wagon and have it returned to the station yard.

3
Summer Weekends at Lyme

On Friday evenings, between June and September in the late 1950s and early 1960s, it was always the task of the late turn Lyme signalman to put the duplicate seat reservation labels above the seats booked on the 9 am. Two trains had through coaches to Waterloo on Saturdays in the summer months (in 1958 the 9 am and 3.05 pm departures), attached to up trains at Axminster. He also had the job of refilling the water tanks of each coach and cleaning the windows.

In addition to his signalling duties, the early turn signalman had to deal with train enquiries, issue tickets and book in luggage. As if this wasn't enough, very often a lorry would turn up with camping equipment to be stowed away in the passenger train guard's van. All this happened before the arrival of the booking clerk at 8 am. It was on these Saturdays that we reckoned to go home with a pound or so in our pockets as tips. We tried to meet every taxi that arrived, offered to carry suitcases to compartments and find seating for those who had not booked in advance.

Apart from the ordinary passengers, parties of Scouts or Guides often travelled on the train and sometimes caused extra problems, especially when we all had to join in and search for a missing youngster.

I remember a Saturday when one of our two drivers heard the train whistle blow, and coming out of the engineman's rest room found two youngsters trying to move the controls and start the train.

Most 'Luggage in Advance' would arrive on Thursday and Friday, and it was surprising just how many people paid the 2s 6d (12½p), which was the fee for collection from their houses and carriage to the station. For an extra 3d (approximately 1½p) it would be delivered to the guest house or hotel door. This service was provided after the purchase of a passenger ticket, when the necessary forms were completed. Sometimes there were as many as 150 items to be entered on the register, and it was quite usual for us to ask the owners to identify them.

I was always glad when the goods porter came on duty at 9 am, and for an hour or so the station would be fairly quiet. It was the only real chance to sit down and enjoy a cup of tea. After that it was back on one's feet to answer the telephone, change the tablet, stick on labels, book in luggage or even rescue people locked in the toilet. It was important to remember to keep a good supply of penny pieces for those people who 'couldn't wait', and we had to keep checking the toilets to ensure nobody had run off with the paper!

When the 10.45 am from Waterloo stopped at Axminster at 1.34 pm to detach coaches for Lyme, the portering staff had to make sure that passengers for other destinations were not still on board. It was amazing how many people who should have travelled in the front portion

Dr R. F. S. Tyson

16. No. 30584 at Axminster with fireman Grenville Morgan, and porter Dick Summers handing over the tablet.

of the train finished up at Lyme, asking to go on to Seaton, Sidmouth or Budleigh Salterton. One of the staff from Lyme would travel on an earlier branch train to meet these coaches, collect the tickets, stick labels marked 'Waterloo' onto the windows, and see that its arrival at the terminus was free from mishap. Meanwhile at Lyme the staff would wait to do the 'weaseling'. In about twenty minutes from this train alone we could pick up three or four pounds to be shared out later.

When everyone from the 10.45 am had been cleared, the station building and both side gates were locked to allow the coaching stock to be cleaned before the return journey. One of us would go through the coaches to replenish the toilets with hand towels and soap. Another two, armed with brooms and trays, would sweep out the litter, and a fourth would attend to the water tanks. The stationmaster would put up the seat reservation labels and generally supervise; for providing the 10.45 am train arrived on time at 2.11 pm, we only had 40 minutes at the most to do this as the train was due to leave again at 3.05 pm for Waterloo. Twenty minutes before departure, one side gate was opened for passengers, otherwise there would be a scramble for seats. This also gave the lads another chance to make a bob or two.

After many years absence, a service which ran before the Second World War began again in the summer of 1960 – the 7 am from Cleethorpes. Transferred from Bournemouth, and running via Bath and Templecombe Junction, it was

17. The 10.45 am from Waterloo having departed on the down road, no. 30584 is in the process of transferring the three coaches for Lyme Regis to the bay platform via the up sidings.

R. C. Riley

rerouted to Sidmouth and Exmouth where it arrived at 5.40 pm, with a connection at Axminster for Lyme Regis. Mid-morning would see the departure from Lyme Regis to connect at Axminster with the northbound 10.40 am from Exmouth and Sidmouth to Cleethorpes where it arrived at 9.30 pm. This service finished on 1 September 1962.

The main feature of summer Saturdays was the use of an additional engine for double-heading, which attracted railway enthusiasts each week armed with cameras or tape recording equipment. They would come to see the train consisting of five carriages and hauled by any two of the three Adams Radial tank engines, 30582–4, assigned to the job.

For a limited number of Saturdays during the summer months, one of the Adams Radial tanks would travel light to Axminster from its home shed at Exmouth Junction to be attached to the 8.32 am one-coach passenger train which would be double-headed. A guard from Exeter would be on this train to take up duty with the 9 am departure from Lyme Regis.

On arrival at the Lyme Regis home signal, the pilot engine would be detached and driven down to the yard, after which the main train would arrive in the bay road. The pilot engine would then be allowed to move out of the yard to the bay road facing points, and was then attached to the coach in the bay. This done, the train would reverse out onto the running line, and after the points had been changed, allowed to move down onto the four carriages for

18. Nos 30583 and 30584 double-heading towards Lyme Regis at Combpyne on a summer Saturday. The camping coach can be seen in the siding on the left of the picture.

Lens of Sutton

Waterloo, already standing in the main platform. The engine, housed overnight at Lyme Regis, would be signalled out of the bay road, the points changed, then allowed to move down onto the other engine, and so make up the double-headed 9 am to Waterloo. This was a recorded seven-minute turn-around. The four carriages detached at Axminster were shunted and attached to the 8.30 am ex Exeter Central passenger train to Waterloo at 9.24 am. Other trains on summer Saturdays were also double-headed, and later during the day the engine that had been working the branch during the week would return light to Exmouth Junction shed for servicing.

In spite of a general shortage of carriage cleaners, at least Waterloo provided nice clean stock. Mind you, this was only after we had carried out a campaign in our own way – we simply did not clean any of the dirty carriages that arrived. A few complaints by the general public helped to solve our dilemma – we asked a number of travellers to write into head office at Waterloo and we pressurised our stationmaster and the local trains' inspector.

Between July and the end of September we would often have the Adams tanks busy handling two Sunday specials to Lyme Regis. One would come from Taunton and travel via Chard Central, Chard Town and thence to Axminster, the other from Bath via Evercreech Junction, Templecombe and Yeovil Junction. Occasionally a Sunday would also see the arrival of a railway enthusiasts' special train from

19. Every year the Oldham Boys' Brigade visited Lyme Regis. Here, near Axminster, their special return train from Lyme Regis is headed by T9 4–4–0 no. 30719 on 27 June 1959.

S. C. Nash

Waterloo. Even now I can remember counting over 900 tickets on these days.

I always look back with amusement to early one Sunday summer morning when I was cleaning out the two carriages berthed in the bay road. Opening the first door on the platform side I caught a strong smell of raw meat. Cautiously walking along the coach, I came to an abrupt halt as I noticed a tramp asleep on the floor. I did not go bald-headed at him, but asked if he had enjoyed his 'kip'. His reply was, 'Sorry, old boy. If you would let me have that broom and tray I will clean up the mess I have made.'

The tramp had taken the two seat cushions and put them on the floor to make a bed. Alongside him was an open parcel with pieces of meat in it. I said to him, 'I'll be back in twenty minutes and I expect you to be gone.'

I don't think even fifteen minutes had gone by when the tramp came into the office with the cleaning equipment and told me he had swept out both the carriages and emptied the rubbish into the litter bin. Accepting a cup of tea, he told me he was a victim of redundancy in London where he had been an office manager. He had now given up looking for work.

When the permanent withdrawal of the through Waterloo service was made at the end of the 1963 summer timetable, we really missed the busy times caused by these and the Sunday special workings.

4
Goodbye to the 'Lyme Billys'

Like all railway employees we were entitled to receive two free passes after two years service, the number increasing for longer service. In addition we were allowed quarter fare for any rail travel. Using a free pass, I made a trip out to Axminster one Thursday which was market day, using the 10 am train.

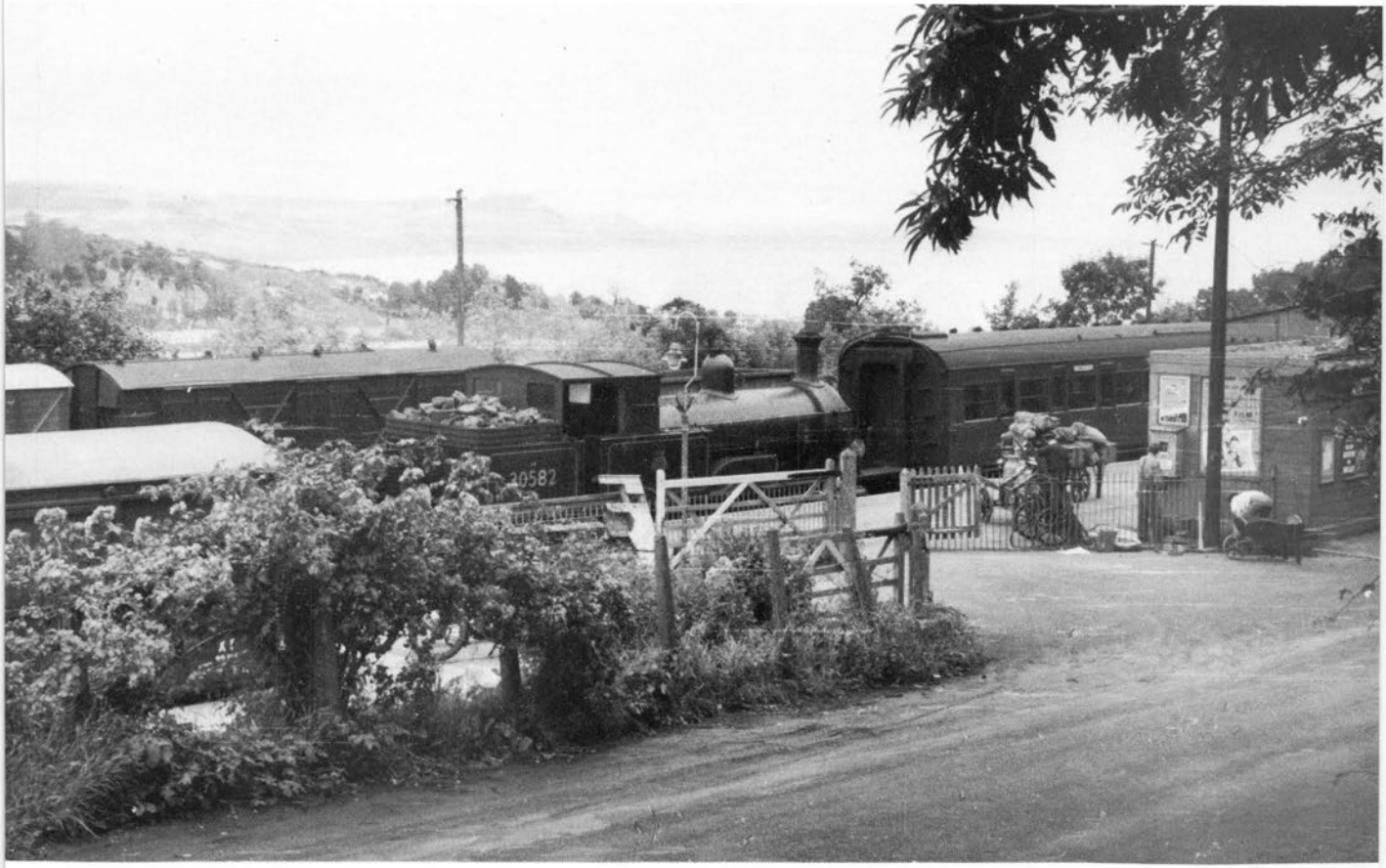
Arriving a few minutes early, I decided to sit down on one of the platform benches and take a hard look at the station I had come to love, and perhaps my recollections of that journey will re-create something of the character of the line. From where I sit I can see in front of me the goods shed with its three sidings. Besides the hissing from the Adams tank locomotive no. 30584, I can hear someone bagging up the coal from the bunkers at the end of the yard. As the station is 249 feet above sea level one can enjoy a magnificent view down towards the Lim valley. Higher up I can see the traffic passing in and out of Lyme Regis on the road to Charmouth, and if I turn to the right, there is the famous Golden Cap cliff with the sea 619 feet below it. Eastwards is the great fossil bearing cliff of Ven, and in the distance Chesil beach swinging in a steep curve out to Portland.

This morning a few people have come to the station by taxi or from the bus which arrives at hourly intervals. Not many people actually walk up to the station from the town, as the road is steep and long even for the casual walker without suitcases and bags. My attention is again focused on the locomotive completing its run-round, and I stand up to watch Harold the goods porter coupling the engine to the green painted coaching stock. Today three coaches are being used, a first and third-class compartment coach, an open third and, lastly, a third-class open brake.

Moving up to the end of the platform and looking across to my right, I can see the engine shed and the coaling stage which is used mainly in the early morning or evening. At the end of the platform is the signal-box with its fourteen levers, one of them unconnected. At one time it housed the electric tablet instrument, but this was moved into the station building in 1930 when the tablet instruments at Combpyne and the signals were taken away. Up until this time there were two block sections, Axminster–Combpyne and Combpyne–Lyme Regis. To the left side of the main platform is the bay siding and the cattle dock.

After a few words with the driver and fireman, George Johns and his cousin, Grenville Morgan, it is time to nip smartly into the first coach. Ralph Watkins, the signalman, having handed over the tablet, pulled off the signals and waves his green flag for the train to pull away. (Remember, no guard is required on branch lines unless more than three carriages are in use.)

Now the train is moving with 30584 sounding like a giant locomotive as it passes the signal-box and platform starting signal. Already it is



Brian Hilton

20. A quiet, everyday scene at Lyme Regis terminus, with the lovely Dorset coastline as a backdrop.

feeling the strain as it starts to tackle the 1 in 66 gradient increasing to 1 in 40, passing the up advance starting signal on its left and the down home signal on the right. We pass under the road bridge on the Lyme–Axminster main road and, still climbing, the Whalley Lane bridge with banking on the left side of the track, and a view of Uplyme through my windows on the right.

Already we have left Dorset and entered Devon and are travelling towards Cannington viaduct, but before getting there the train is running over what has become known as Happy Valley. On our left now is the Lyme–Exeter road and, beyond, Pinhay Farm. Down in the valley Shapwick Farm, the quarry and scattered dwellings make up the view. The gradient is 1 in 210/194.

Before the train begins to cross the viaduct the gradient alters to 1 in 55 and it slows down for a sharp right-hand curve on the approach. The viaduct is 203 yards long, 93 feet high and is exactly 5 miles 21 chains from Axminster, the gradient is 1 in 82 and 1 in 94 over the viaduct.

Hugh Ballantyne

21. Cannington viaduct showing the arch which was strengthened before opening. The three-coach train is the LCGB East Devon Rail Tour on 7 March 1965. The locos are Ivatt 2–6–2Ts nos. 41206 (leading) and 41291.

The gradient now alters to 1 in 40 as we travel through shallow cuttings towards Combpyne. Drawing into the platform on the left I am able to see the porter, Len Enticott, opening the doors of the passenger van and taking out a water churn and a can of paraffin. The station is lit by three Tilley lamps, and the water is for the porter and the family who live in the station house. (Sometimes as many as six churns would pass back and forth daily, which indicated that Mrs Fowler and her seven children were having baths or doing the weekly wash!) I once worked for a few hours at Combpyne when Len Enticott was sick and I was able to look closely at the station workings. Towards Axminster I can still pick out signs of the old loop points and signal placements. At the Lyme end of the platform is the ground frame and goods siding points. In the siding itself stands a camping coach painted in Southern green and used by campers between May and September. On my right I can see

Lens of Sutton

22. Ivatt 2–6–2T no. 41307 on a freight at Combpyne. The water cans are for the station house – the far can is oil for lighting the station lamps.

Hook Farm with the old signal-box now acting as a chicken coop. Leaving the 250-foot long platform the train starts on a steep drop at 1 in 88 to Axminster, 4 miles 21 chains away, and to the left I can see Colyton and part of Honiton Common several miles away. We then pass through Combpyne Woods and are engulfed by trees and shrubs of all types, beech, oak and ferns.

I have actually seen the roe deer that live there, and was once almost bowled over by the Axe Vale Hunt as they crossed the railway track and charged away in the direction of Musbury in pursuit of a fox. One hardly notices the very sharp right-hand curve out of Combpyne or the equally severe left through the woods, but is aware of the train slowing as it passes Bulmoor Farm which is down the slope and away to the left. Still dropping towards Axminster, with the gradients at 1 in 60/503/52, and with Hartgrove Farm on the left, a carpet of bluebells spreads along the trackside for over two miles during the late spring.

Between the second and third mile-post the gradient changes to 1 in 40 as we cross over brick built bridges and can see down into the Axe valley dominated by Stockland transmitter, 238 feet above ground level. I was relieving in the signal-box at Honiton bank one day when

23. No. 30582 negotiates the notorious Trill curve with the usual two-coach train in 1958.

Mike Esau

the mast was being erected, and remember marvelling at the three German engineers who were hoisted up the mast each day in a wicker basket to scramble about, joining the struts as they came up on tackle. The only part not hoisted up was the aerial itself which was lowered by helicopter.

Heading towards the dreaded 10-chain Trill curve the train is now crawling along with the wheel flanges squeaking against the rails and it is on this sharp left-hand bend that most of the wear occurs. Mr Jack Frewin, who had worked on the Lyme branch for many years, explained to me in 1955 the apprehension of the downward journey around the by now famous Trill curve near Axminster where many engines

slipped off the rails, or eventually had their wheel flanges ripped to pieces.

Now only a mile and a half from Axminster, we pass over the iron bridge which spans the Axminster, Musbury and Seaton road and the fixed distant signal known as Abbey Gate. The gradient here is 1 in 40.

By now one can see the main line to Seaton Junction and on to Honiton, and the rivers Axe and Yarty which join a mile or so south-west of Axminster before meandering on to Seaton seven miles away. Nearing the end of the journey, the train crosses over the main line and to the right is the famous Axminster Carpet Company, started by Thomas Witty in 1755. Passing the Axminster branch home signal we arrive at the station, approached by a 1 in 80 gradient on a sweeping right-hand curve. Adjacent to the branch platform is the coaling stage and the water tower. Coming to a halt at the platform I hear, all too soon, the familiar, 'All change'.

I would really have liked to have been there on 29 November 1965 to see the last trip of the branch line train, but was unfortunately working the 2 pm shift at Chard Junction signal-box. However, Mr Leonard Duke, an Axminster councillor, was later able to tell me all about it. His father drove the very first steam engine along its whole length and so his memories span about sixty-two years.

In May 1958 a meeting was held by the Lyme Chamber of Commerce regarding the possible closure of the line, the findings being reported in the Bridport News for Friday 16 May. The article asked local people to make more use of the railway service and appealed to the stationmaster, Mr Causley, to encourage British Rail to give the seaside resort more publicity, and to encourage more excursion trips from London, Salisbury, Exeter, and smaller places such as Martock, Yeovil and Crewkerne. The figures quoted were that approximately 1,500 passengers used the line during the previous winter months, with around 8,000 for the summer period. Owing to a dramatic increase in freight and demurrage charges the tonnage had shown a marked decline. In fact the Chamber of Commerce was telling its townsfolk that closure of the line was not all that far away.

The last evidence of the protest against the closure was loaned to me by Mr Ted Gosling, former Curator of the Lyme Regis Museum, of which the following, dated 4 November 1964, is an extract from the original.

SOUTH WESTERN AREA T.U.C.C.
PROPOSED WITHDRAWAL OF
PASSENGER TRAIN SERVICES
AXMINSTER–LYME REGIS BRANCH.

1) Constance Nelson, Flat 2, Woodville, Silver Street, Lyme Regis.
   General objection on grounds of inadequate alternative means of transport.
   Railway Board's reply: It is considered that the existing omnibus services already in operation, and the proposed additional services to be provided on Saturdays during the summer period, which will all connect into and out of main line trains at Axminster, will provide adequate means of transport for most passengers who now use the rail services.
2) H. Williams, Town Clerk, Lyme Regis.
   General objection on the grounds that tourist industry of the area would be adversely affected.
   Reply: (a) Please see reply to Item 1.
   (b) It is not considered that tourist trade would be affected to any great extent by the proposals especially as on peak days of summer tourist travel extra buses will be run to Lyme Regis from the Axminster railhead.

Dr G. R. Siviour

24. No. 30584 near Abbey Gates en route to Combpyne and Lyme Regis in 1956. The Axminster distant signal can be seen behind the second coach.

5 & 5a) D. W. Mountain, 34, Harbury Road, Carshalton, Surrey.
Objections on grounds that the public notice does not indicate that existing alternative services will provide connections with the main line services at Axminster.
Reply: In the event of withdrawal of the branch line services, the existing services will be adjusted where necessary to provide road/rail connections.

6 & 6a) F. H. Parsons, 3, Broadway Cottages, Musbury Cottages, Axminster.
General objection: Cheaper fare by rail. Trunks cannot be conveyed on buses.
Reply: The cheap day rail fare is 6d (2½p), cheaper than the ordinary bus fare.
Collection and delivery of parcels traffic and passenger's luggage in advance will be maintained in the area.

C. G. Maggs

25. Following the closure of the Lyme branch, Minirail Ltd attempted to open the line as a narrow gauge concern, starting from Combpyne. This picture shows some of the rolling stock which would have been used had the venture proved successful.

The T.U.C.C., inquiry was held at Lyme Regis on 4 November 1964 with over 200 people attending, and 131 written protests were received.

On that last trip on 29 November 1965 there were no brass bands nor the sight of bunting blowing in the evening breeze. Almost all the railway enthusiasts had travelled on an earlier train, leaving a small number to see the diesel multiple unit move out into the darkness. Tom Woodman, who had served on the branch line as a fireman and still later, as a driver, and who drove the last train, told me that a number of detonators were scrounged from Axminster and these were exploded as the train passed over them. There was too much sadness for a lot of cheering; nevertheless some onlookers did make an effort.

At Combpyne a small number of people had turned out from the village to wave goodbye and to take flash-light photographs for their albums.

Mr Bill Fowler and his family lived for a time in Combpyne station house, and he was on the last train. He later moved to Exeter on promotion to senior consultant for the detection of

metal damage by fracture etc. to railway track in the West Country.

As the train arrived at Axminster accompanied by a barrage of detonators, the final passengers on the line detrained. They watched as the porter took the key token to Axminster signal-box to release the diesel multiple unit to travel the main line to Exeter. Within minutes the branch line was dead.

In April 1969 there was to be renewed life for the branch, for it was then that the name of Minirail Ltd was first mentioned in the pages of the local press. Nobody was more surprised than I, after arriving home one day from working in a local factory, to be told that a Mr Anderson would like to see me about the erection of the signalling on a narrow gauge railway, to be built on the track bed of the branch with headquarters at Combpyne.

This contact was made during the summer of 1971, and it was arranged that I should meet Mr Anderson the following Saturday morning so he could show me the signalling equipment he had purchased from British Rail; namely, a Tyers No. 6 Instrument, a staff ticket machine, signal gantries and ground discs.

When I called that morning he had actually run out track for a quarter of a mile towards Axminster to a point called Bulmoor Halt. In the station area were thirteen coaches from Longleat and one Curzon engine, plus a little diesel-engined vehicle to pull five or so trucks piled high with sleepers and other materials.

Already the old station had taken on a new look, but Mr Anderson felt it was important to retain the old booking office as a reminder of times gone by. Although I discussed the plans with him and a potential opening day in July 1972, it was sadly not to be. He had spent many months trying to raise enough capital to continue, but his luck had run out. His efforts to operate the Minirail single handed failed, even though I had, with many other interested people, asked him to make use of volunteer help on the pattern of many of our now famous private railways.

5
Locomotive History – Lyme Regis Branch

A unique feature of the Lyme Regis–Axminster branch was the various types of motive power that were used experimentally in an effort to run an efficient and economical service.

During construction in 1902–3, an LSWR 330 class 0–6–0 saddle tank, no. 131, was made available to the contractors. In fact, on Thursday 22 January 1903 this engine was used to haul the inspection train and was later tried on service trains, but proved unsatisfactory. It was replaced with two of the class A1 0–6–0 Stroudley Terrier tanks. These were purchased in March 1903 from the London, Brighton & South Coast Railway – nos 646, 'Newington', and 668, 'Clapham', and renumbered 734 and 735.

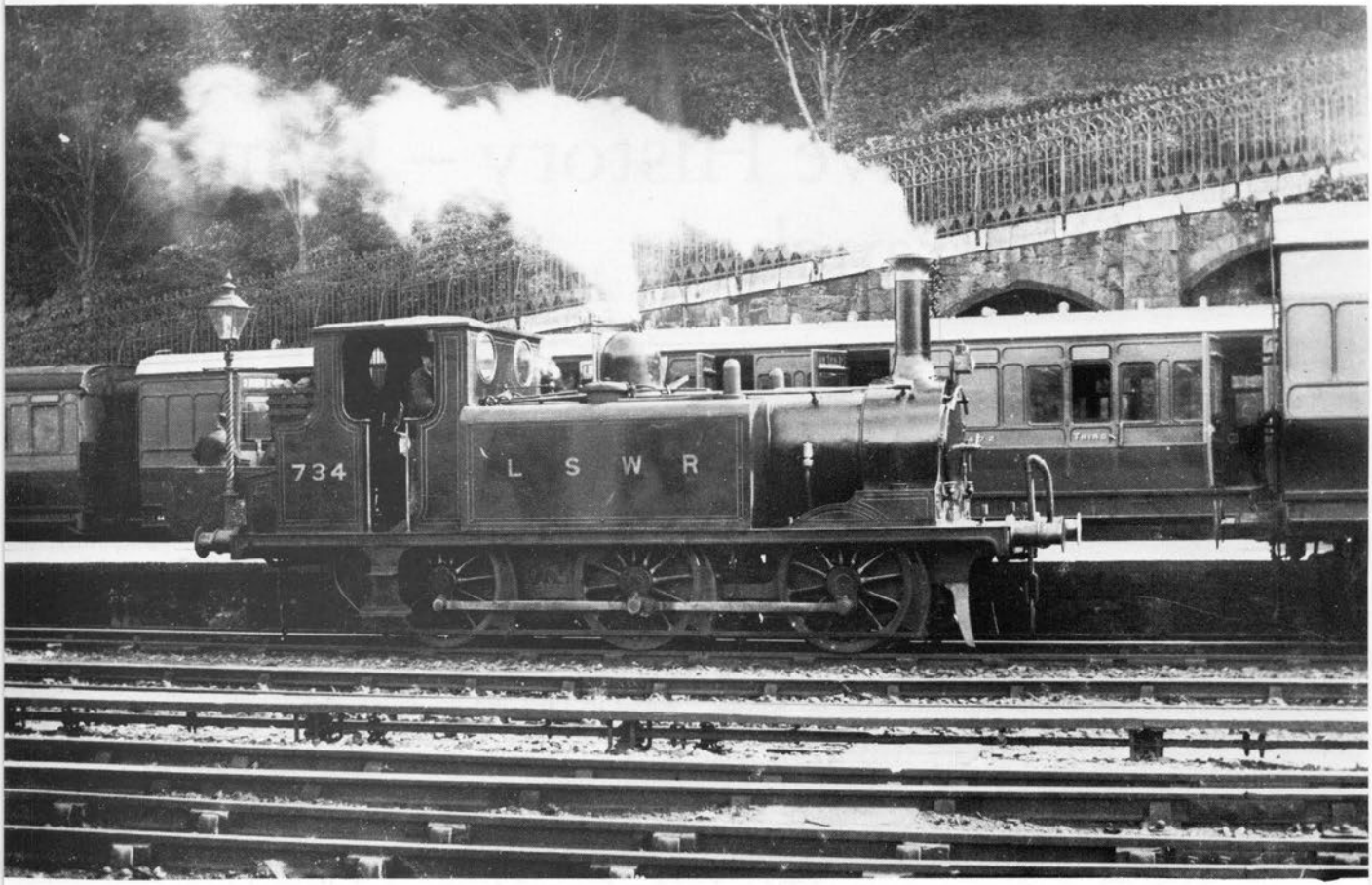
With the increase in traffic and pressures of the summer holiday service by August 1905, Exmouth Junction shed would send an 02 class 0–4–4 tank to deputise or assist, since the steep gradients were proving too much for the Terriers. The 02s sent to Lyme Regis were not really the ideal choice for weight reasons, as they could only work over the branch line with partially filled side tanks and bunker, which meant their use was limited.

After the 1905 summer service nos 734 and 735 continued to work during the winter but in January 1906, an 02 class no. 228 was sent to Lyme Regis. Following further trials, using this engine, its side tanks were marked with the maximum permissible water capacity within the weight restrictions of the line.

The summer service of 1906 saw no. 228 working with no. 735. No. 734, after working for a time at Yeovil, was sold to the Freshwater, Yarmouth & Newport Railway on the Isle of Wight in 1913 and the number changed to '2'. Sometime later it was handed over to the Southern Railway and became W8. Named 'Freshwater' it was withdrawn from the Isle of Wight by British Railways in 1963 as no. 32646.

No. 735 worked the line until May 1907, when Exmouth Junction shed allocated three of the 02 class to Lyme Regis including no. 228. The other two were nos 177 and 202. With only one engine on the line for both passenger and freight working, the second and third were put to work in the Exeter district with their duties changing around each week.

The three engines managed to survive until 16 October 1913, when it was decided to carry out trials with an Adams 415 class 4–4–2T locomotive, no. 0124, with a modification to give the bogie greater sideplay for the curves. With the tests successfully completed, two more modified engines, nos 0521 and 0419, were fully



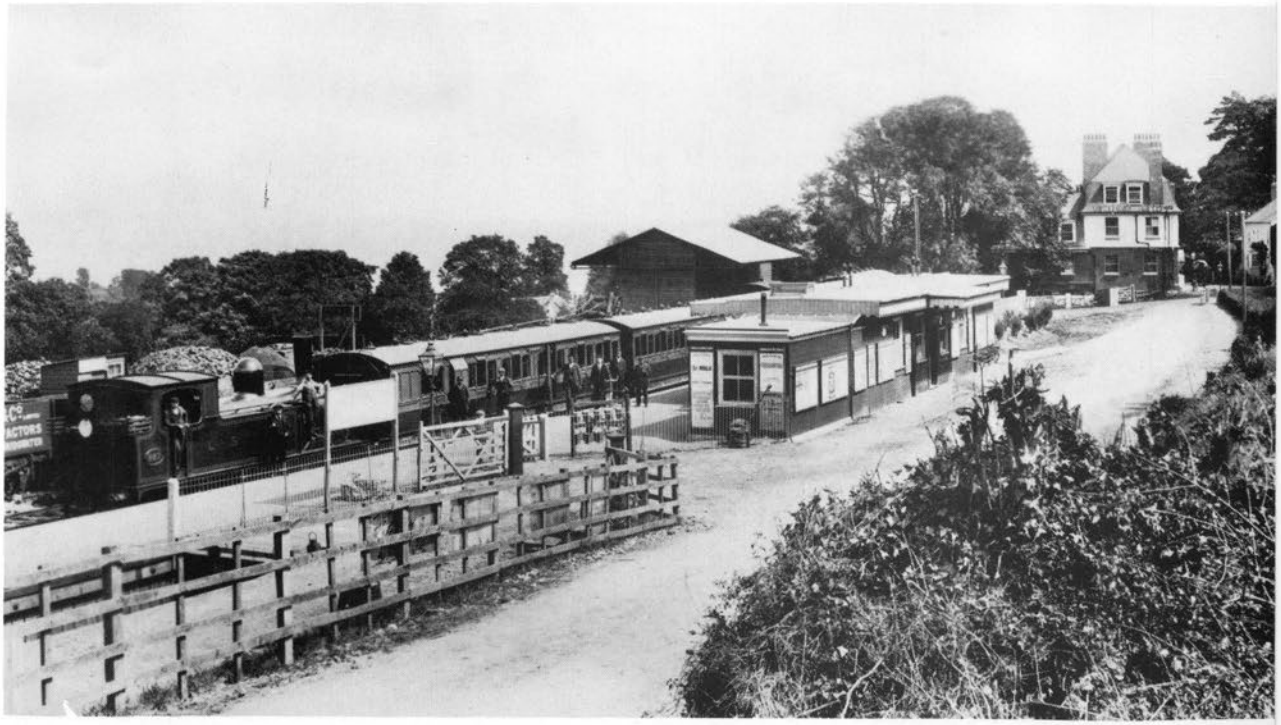
26. Ex-LB&SCR Terrier no. 46, 'Newington' (LSWR no. 734), which worked on the Lyme Regis branch, seen here at Exeter Queen Street (now Central) in the early years of the century.

L&GRP, courtesy David & Charles

operational by mid-March 1914. An 02 class locomotive would be used to help out during the summer months, especially for double-heading or to act as a replacement during maintenance.

No. 0419 was withdrawn in November 1923 after the Grouping, no. 0521 was withdrawn in July 1925, while the remaining engine, no. 0125, was left to carry on with the help of the 02s until February 1926 when it was joined by another modified Adams 415 class, no. 0520.

With the ever growing cost of maintenance on the 415 class engines, the Southern Railway decided to try an ex-South Eastern & Chatham Railway P class 0–6–0 tank locomotive, no. A558, and a London, Brighton & South Coast Railway D1 class 0–4–2 tank, no. B612. However, the P class disgraced itself by losing time on most of its journeys, but the D1 was more successful though working with a reduced coal and water payload. Modified to meet the branch



Pamlin Prints

27. Lyme Regis station in 1907, with Adams 02 class 0–4–4T no. 227 in charge of the train. The station building is seen before extension.

line restrictions, four D1s were therefore assigned to Exmouth Junction shed, nos B276, B359, B612 and B633, but the onerous nature of the duties led to daily reports of leaking tubes, loose and badly worn tyres and strained frames, coupled with slipping in bad weather. These were similar problems that affected engines which had worked the line before and it was clearly time to make another change.

By August 1930 the two Adams 415 class locomotives, which had been reposing at Eastleigh and intended for scrap, were again brought into service after a major overhaul. This marked a welcome return of nos 0125 and 0520 by the local drivers, even though there was a setback – constant replacement of the firebars and boiler tubing. These engines were renumbered 3125 and 3520 with the third engine, 02 class no. 199, helping out from time to time.

In March 1946 another Adams tank from the East Kent Railway became available for purchase and the Southern Railway bought it for £800. Its number was 5, ex-London & South Western Railway no. 488. Given a major overhaul because it had lain derelict since 1939, this engine was added to the Southern stock. It began work on the Lyme Regis branch line the following December. When the railways became nationalised in 1948, no. 3125 became 30582, 3488 30583 and 3520 30584.

In order to try and reduce the running cost of the branch line and provide a possible replacement for the ageing Adams tank engines,

S. C. Nash

28. The Western influence – no. 1462 on the 10 am from Lyme Regis at Cannington on 12 November 1958. This engine was on trial, as a replacement for the Adams tanks, but failed to prove a success.

11 November 1957 saw the appearance of an ex-Great Western Railway 14XX class 0–4–2 tank engine, no. 1462, for trial runs. Failing to complete the required test, she was withdrawn.

During the early part of the year and before the summer service of 1960, a London Midland Region 2–6–2 tank, no. 41297, was given trials, and further tests on 13 November 1960 were successfully completed. The next engine of the class to show its paces was no. 41308. During her test she was able to pull up to six coaches unaided. Track renewals continued, and with completion in December of that year, full

29. Shortly before closure, with sidings lifted, a single-car diesel awaits departure from Lyme Regis for Axminster.

R. B. Parr

authority was given for the use of the LMR 2–6–2Ts.

This period was to mark the end of an era for the 'Lyme Billys' as they had become affectionately known. Because of its condition no. 30584 was withdrawn in January 1961, followed by 30582 in July. Happily, on 9 July 1961 no. 30583 was purchased by the Bluebell Railway Preservation Society at Sheffield Park, Sussex, and given back her former number, 488.

Before the end there was yet another change, for on 4 November 1963 the London Midland 2–6–2Ts were replaced by a two-car diesel multiple unit for passenger service, although a shortage of diesel units saw the return of another London Midland tank engine, no. 41295 in October 1964.

For a short period, from 15 February 1965, the London Midland tanks worked a push-pull set. Then, following the closure of the Halwill–Torrington line in March 1965, single-car diesel units replaced the push-pull sets. These were later supplemented by a driving trailer car.

For the remaining few months these continued to work the line until closure on 29 November 1965.

6
The Relief Signalman

It was during the early part of 1961 that a vacancy came up for a relief signalman class 2 and general purpose man to work between Exeter Central and Wilton South, near Salisbury. I was really taken aback when I was accepted for this appointment, and can well recall the nine interviewees all bundled into the head office, one by one, to go through the usual routine, along with knocking knees and sweaty hands. Quite honestly I had not given it a lot of thought, although a few of my workmates tried to put me in the picture regarding the type of work involved, plus the many hours away from home.

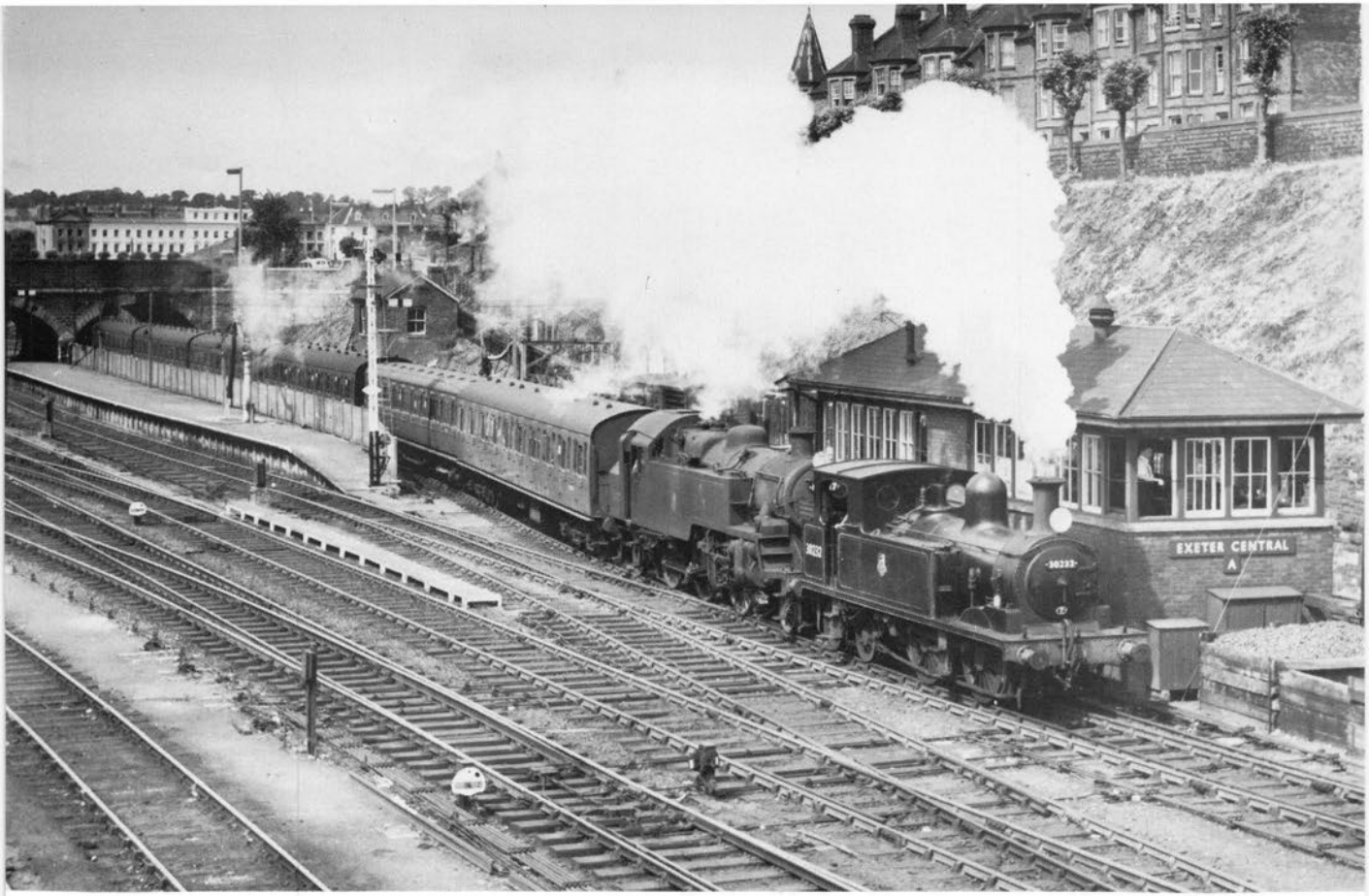
It wasn't until I started to make a note of all the signal-boxes that I would have to get to know, and receive a certificate of competence to work, that I began to worry a little. The list was indeed formidable, totalling forty altogether.

Exeter A and B boxes
Exmouth Junction
Topsham
Exmouth
Pinhoe
Whimple
Broadclyst
Sidmouth Junction
Ottery St Mary
Tipton St John
Chilmark
Hewish
Crewkerne
Sutton Bingham
Yeovil Junction A and B boxes
Semley
Dinton
Yeovil Town
Yeovil Pen Mill
Hendford
Montacute Ground Frame
Honiton
Honiton Incline
Seaton Junction
Seaton
Axminster
Broomgates
Chard Junction
Somerset & Dorset Line
Templecombe Junction
Martock
Sherborne
Milborne Port
Templecombe
Gillingham
Tisbury
Wilton South
Cole
Stalbridge

After 1968 only ten signal-boxes remained in use after modification. Exeter Central A box, Exmouth Junction, Pinhoe, Honiton, Chard Junction, Yeovil Junction A box, Sherborne, Templecombe, Gillingham and Wilton South.

The modification referred to was replacement with a new type of block signalling system, thus removing the use of the bell relay. When Honiton, Chard Junction, Templecombe and Gillingham closed after the last passenger train of the day, the service could operate using the remaining signal-boxes, and this pattern is still in use today.

After qualifying to work each of the boxes, I had to walk the line in order to know the gradients in case a train stopped in the various sections. More important still, in the event of a train dividing, the relief signalman would have to know how best to make a recovery of the divided portion and protect the double line.



30. 02 0–4–4T no. 30232 and standard 2–6–2T no. 82017 leave Exeter Central with an Exmouth branch train on 29 June 1957.

R. C. Riley

Totting up the number of miles I walked during the training period it is hard to believe that it came to nearly 200.

Using my old BSA 125 cc Bantam I covered something like 25,000 miles on my new job in the first twelve months. Admittedly we were given a travel allowance or, to put it correctly, overnight subsistence. This amounted to 10s 0d (50p). Nobody, but nobody was going to give a person bed and breakfast for that amount even in 1961. Most of the relief chaps were pretty good fellows, and on most occasions arrangements could be made with other permanent signalmen to get home or to work. Never once can I remember a guard coming up to me to say, 'You cannot take your motor cycle on a passenger train,' even though we always had more than the permitted pint in the petrol tank.

There were many times when I made arrangements with the drivers of the goods trains that ran between Exeter and Salisbury. Some actually slowed down their trains for me, allowing a dive into the guard's van, then slowing down again at Axminster so that I could jump off. Enough cash for a pint usually did the job and a nice cup of tea if, and whenever, they came into any of the signal-boxes. I believe it made for

R. C. Riley

31. Z class 0–8–0T no. 30950 with freight train at Exmouth Junction. The shed coaling plant is in the background.

good social relations. Another thing which was not officially allowed, unless a man was acting as a pilotman, was to travel on the footplate of any steam locomotive or diesel, yet I travelled on quite a few.

The variety of types was considerable, M7s on the Seaton branch, the Adams Radial tank engines on the Lyme branch, Merchant Navy and West Country class locomotives with such names as 'Channel Packet', 'Clan Line', 'Lamport & Holt Line', 'Ellerman Line', 'Brocklebank Line', 'Honiton', 'Seaton', and 'Lyme Regis', Schools and King Arthur classes, and the LMR and SR diesels 10000–1, and 10201–3 both on freight and passenger work, which they handled turn and turn about with steam.

While mentioning 10001, I can remember an occasion when she was running 23 minutes late off Exeter Central on a Sunday, the day my wife, Sheila, and I had planned to travel up to London by this train. On its arrival at Seaton Junction, just as we were about to enter the carriage, my wife knocked her foot on the running board. Her shoe slipped off and fell between the platform and the track. I could see the driver cursing like mad as he had to reverse the train to allow a porter to retrieve the shoe!

After the train stopped at Gillingham station we went into the restaurant car for lunch. It was a train meal I shall never forget. We were passing through Wilton South and the waiter came along with the soup, calling the driver some unmentionable names. It was obvious that owing to the late running of his train the driver had forgotten the speed restriction which was in operation at the time. My wife and I had to wait until the train started to slow down for the approach

32. Standard 2–6–2T no. 82025 approaching Exmouth from Exeter Central on 13 October 1959.

R. C. Riley

to Salisbury before we could attempt to lift our spoons, for the soup was sloshing about like the sea in a force nine gale. I don't know of another train that ever travelled from Exeter to Waterloo so fast – the 23 minutes late departure from Exeter was converted into a 20 minutes early arrival at Waterloo.

It is ironic that on another day this same diesel locomotive came into Axminister belching out black smoke and with sparks flying everywhere. Acting as the leading porter for the day, I could see a woman swinging her arms all over the place. The oily sparks had made dozens of holes in the fur coat she was wearing. I was to learn later that she had put in a claim for damages and received £700 from the railway.

When taking up duty at any one of the signal-boxes I was always conscious of the need to keep it clean. The neatness and the gleaming brass-work on the signal frames would astonish any housewife. Most of the signal-boxes which were open on Sundays would see the signalman

33. M7 0–4–4T no. 30676 about to depart from Exmouth with a train for Tipton St Johns on 13 October 1959.

R. C. Riley

cleaning the windows and literally scrubbing the floors. Although some of them were polished, this was generally frowned on by the authorities as signalmen had been known to slip on these treated floors, causing injury to themselves.

Every signal-box was different in character. I recall the tiny one at Sutton Bingham with its eight levers; it played an important role in the control movement of the summer service between Yeovil Junction and Exeter. Every Saturday an inspector would take up duty at Seaton Junction along with the resident signalman. By keeping in touch by telephone the inspector could order the retention of a passenger train at Sutton Bingham for a number of minutes. If the service was running late from Waterloo, all sorts of problems to train movement had to be sorted out because of the branch line connections.

The slightly larger framed signal-box, Exeter B, required the signalman to be familiar with the Western Region block bell signals and movements, as it controlled the trains working between Exeter Central and Exeter St Davids stations.

With Exmouth Junction signal-box and its sixty-five levers, one could handle the passing freight and light engines into the freight yard and loco depot in comfort, providing the trains were on time, as well as the Exeter–Exmouth

34. BR standard 2–6–2T no. 82010 arriving at Sidmouth on 13 October 1959 with the signalman waiting to receive the tablet.

R. C. Riley

branch line service. If running times were upset in any way the telephones would be red hot with inquiries.

At Chard Junction we had an up passenger train which passed through the station at four minutes past 5 o'clock. Making allowance for the running time between Axminster and Chard Junction, the crossing gates were kept open to the road until approximately four minutes before its passing. I can well remember the curses and shaking fists of passing traffic if the train was late, as it was the time that hundreds of workers from the Chard Junction Creamery went home for the evening.

Yeovil Junction A, another of the larger single framed boxes, presented little or no problems, although if the trains were running late all one could do was to sort the mess out as best one could.

The biggest problem at Templecombe was the number of shunt movements during an eight-hour shift. Not only had a signalman to contend with trains from the Somerset & Dorset line via Templecombe Junction but the station also handled a very large quota of freight traffic. On the Southern side there were shunt movements in and out of the down siding yard in addition to the stopping and passing passenger train service. This box was by far the busiest between Salisbury and Exeter.

It was during the winter of 1955 whilst at Axminster that I received the chance to act as pilotman. The branch No. 6 Tyers tablet system and telephone line had been brought down by an overnight snowstorm on the Lyme Regis branch. This meant I would have to walk the lineside from Axminster until I found the break. I made my way through the snow which covered the branch to Combpyne Halt, and so on down to Cannington viaduct some 93 feet

F. R. Hebron, Rail Archive Stephenson

35. Merchant Navy class Pacific no. 35017, 'Belgian Marine', clearing Honiton tunnel with the up 'Atlantic Coast Express' in 1952.

Derek Cross

36. The down 'Atlantic Coast Express' with no. 35016, 'Elders Fyffes', passing Seaton Junction in September 1959. Note the extraordinarily high starting signals with co-acting repeaters.

above the rough little lane below. Leaning over the four-foot side wall, I found the break and was able to join both wires and complete my walk into Lyme Regis.

However, my efforts were too late for the 6.15 am light engine working to Axminster to be able to run, so the Adams Radial tank was already standing in the platform road attached to a single coach.

This particular morning Harry Marsh was the signalman, and it was he who guided me into the main building where the Lyme Regis No. 6 Tyers tablet instrument was housed, so I could watch him withdraw the tablet.

This done, I countersigned the train register book, placing around my left arm a red armband on which were the words 'Pilotman' in white lettering. Taking possession of the tablet in the brown leather pouch I showed it to the passenger train guard, Tom Bird, and in my official capacity as pilotman joined the driver and fireman on the footplate.

After the train had arrived at Axminster I handed the tablet to the signalman who signed for it so that normal working could be resumed.

A few years later, after I had become a relief signalman, that dreadful winter of 1962/3 caused me one problem after another. Looking at television on Boxing Day, a special bulletin was put out to viewers warning that heavy snowfalls were to be expected that night.

Talking things over with my wife at the party we were enjoying that afternoon, we decided I should change into my working clothes. Later

Dr G. R. Siviour

37. Chard Junction with S15 class 4–6–0 no. 30828 on a down stopping train.

on I left on my motor cycle to travel the 30 miles to Yeovil, to make sure I would be on duty the following morning at 6.30 am. As early as 5 pm the first snowflakes began to fall, fanned by a strengthening wind, making it very difficult to see the road. It was impossible to travel with the crash helmet visor down, so I was tormented by the snow as it got into my eyes and up my nose. Just as bad was the glare of the motor cycle headlight as it pierced the millions of little flakes that were cascading down fiercely as I neared Yeovil. By the time I had made my way to Yeovil Hendford signal-box the snow was lying at least two inches thick. As the branch line was closed that day for the running of passenger trains, I spoke to Train Control and told them what I had done, and received permission to bed down in the signal-box that night. I had thought to carry a sleeping bag with me and a good supply of food in case I was unable to get home the following day.

Even as I looked out of the signal-box at ten o'clock, before I got into the sleeping bag, the snow had risen to a height level with the platform.

The following morning I was presented with a problem before the day began – I could not get down the steps leading to ground level as the snow was a good three to four feet high, so I was pleased that the fire buckets were kept just outside the door. Designers had little thought for our sanitary needs!

By 8 am the news was coming in fast from

R. C. Riley

38. M7 no. 30129 with ex-LSWR 'Gated Stock' departs from Yeovil Junction for Yeovil Town. S15 4–6–0 no. 30829 shunts a freight train in the yard.

different signalmen all over the region of points frozen solid, signals immovable, men unable to get to work, and much else besides. Some of the railwaymen I spoke to later said that they had walked four to five miles that morning to report in.

News then came through that Salisbury could not get the snowplough working as the running roads were blocked, and it was late in the morning before the first plough in the Exeter district was on the move. Buckhorn Weston (Gillingham) tunnel was blocked at both ends, and the locomotive pushing the snowplough had got stuck on the eastern side. It was later hauled clear by a second engine. Even if a train had got as far as Sherborne, Chard Junction or Sidmouth Junction, each of which had hand operated crossing gates, it was impossible to work them because the snow had made them immovable across the line.

On the first day of the snowfall the railway in the West Country was paralysed. When day one was nearly over and darkness fell it started to snow again. All my efforts to make a pathway from the bottom of the signal-box steps across the line to the platform were quickly covered up again. At least I had managed to get my motor cycle into the station waiting room for it had been completely covered overnight.

During the second night a strong wind moved quite a lot of the fallen snow away from the station to further down the line, giving me a chance to try and free the wires connecting the running line signals to my box. Along with a couple of permanent way men, we tried to move enough snow and ice to free the points from the main line to the siding loop.

It was during the following morning that an engine with brake van made the first of two trips from Yeovil to Taunton to clear the running line

39. Sherborne station with old and new signal boxes. The new one enjoyed a life of approximately ten years.

W. Philip Conolly

before it was decided to try and run a passenger train that evening. The passenger train left Yeovil Town at 4.35 pm and should have been back from Taunton at 9.15 pm, but did not arrive until 11.20 pm. I knew they were having similar snow problems on the Paddington–Penzance line but did not think there would be that much of a delay.

When I had time during the second day, I listened to the news of men returning from leave, and those working as long as 16 hours to help out with snow clearing. By midday the situation had improved to allow a locomotive to run freely up and down the main line, but travelling under caution. Many of the signals were not working properly and those that needed the oil lamps topped up were showing no illuminated colour position during the hours of darkness. It was a dangerous situation. Each and every signalman was given the order to work each signal and points lever, where possible, every quarter of an hour. All signalmen working the 16-hour day (two 8-hour shifts) were asked to work a 12-hour day. I had agreed to cover a 16-hour period, as my local opposite number, John, had a wife who was ill and he also had the worry of looking after his children.

The third night saw the snow falling again, this time very lightly as the blizzard conditions had eased up. Trains that had been on the move

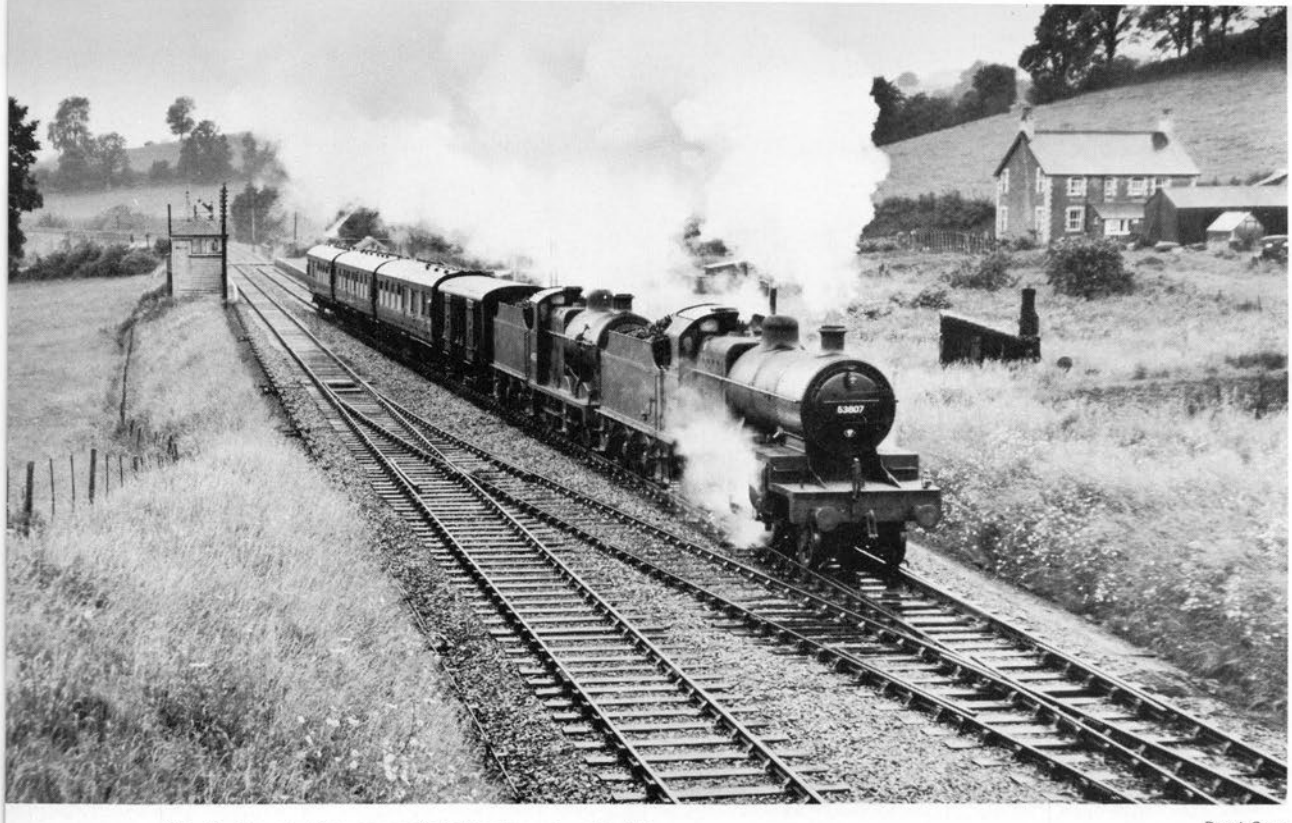
Brian Morrison

40. BR standard class 5MT 4–6–0 no. 73047 passing Templecombe shed with the southbound 'Pines Express' in April 1956 before going under the Salisbury–Exeter line.

were late everywhere. The thought of sticking to a timetable was definitely out. Many dozens of carriages were kept out of service as the heating pipes were frozen solid. The passing of each day for the next three weeks or so brought fresh falls of snow, and each night the snowploughs were out running up and down the main line between Exeter and Salisbury after the running of the last passenger service. It was five days before the first of the freight trains came into operation.

Following the return of my opposite number to normal duty after an absence of several days, I decided one morning to try my luck at getting home to Seaton and back the same day.

First of all this meant a lineside walk to Yeovil Town station to catch a train out to Yeovil Junction, then to Seaton. Normally I would have travelled by the bus service from Axminster, but that morning fresh snow forced all transport off the road until late afternoon. Arriving at Seaton Junction I walked along the running line to Colyford and made the rest of the journey by road. Reaching home around 11 am I took a well-earned bath, had a hot meal, change of



41. During my time as a relief signalman I worked the Somerset and Dorset line boxes at Cole and Stalbridge. Here Somerset and Dorset 2–8–0 no. 53807 pilots 4F 0–6–0 no. 44558 out of Cole on a pouring wet day bound for Templecombe.

Derek Cross

clothing, and set off about 3 pm for the return journey to Yeovil. Meeting up with John again, who had taken the early turn duty, it was agreed that I should do all the late turns until I could use my motor cycle again.

It was towards the end of the fourth week that I decided to try and put my motor cycle on the road once more. Up to then the main roads almost everywhere in the West Country were still partially blocked, and although many of the country lanes were cleared by the local farmers, others were closed for five weeks afterwards. Throughout all this bad weather the longest that I could get home for a break was four hours in any one day. The pressure of being away from home began to tell on me, and although I asked our inspector for a posting nearer home he could not help me. In fact the working limit of those men who were on duty was being strained to an almost impossible degree.

In the circumstances I can only praise all those men who were in a similar position to myself, and who only saw their homes for short periods. Mr Patterson, the Divisional Manager, sent us all a letter of appreciation and later asked to see each man who had helped out during the great blizzard. He personally travelled by train to every station and stopped at every crossing gate to make sure he met as many of his operational staff as possible.

Most people in the West Country have tales to tell of the bad winter of 1963 and later in 1968,

42. The down 'Atlantic Coast Express' at Winchfield behind diesel electric locomotive no. 10203, a type introduced between Salisbury and Exeter in the 1950s before being transferred to the London Midland Region.

Crown Copyright, National Railway Museum, York

but the winter I always like to talk about is a different one – the snowfall in March 1965. I had changed my 250 cc Ariel motor cycle for a Bond three wheeler car because the previous summer I had twisted my back helping to unload an open wagon at Lyme Regis, and it had affected the sciatic nerve. I was always conscious of this when cold weather was about.

I drove the three wheeler up to Milborne Port, where I was to relieve from 3.30 pm until 11.30 pm, even though the forecast was for snow later in the day. As it started to get dark about 4 pm the first snowflakes began to fall. By 6 o'clock the snow was falling hard. Just after 7 pm the 5.25 pm Exeter–Waterloo train passed the box and so too the 3 pm Waterloo–Exeter. As the evening went on I took frequent peeps out of the signal-box window and could see the snow gradually building up to the level of the platform. In addition to this, ice was forming on the windows, so I put on a raincoat and hat and armed with a shovel left the signal-box while all was quiet to clear the snow from around my 'buzz bomb' car, as I used to call it. The three wheeler was not only covered in snow, but the snow had frozen solid! I knew then that after I had closed the box at about 11.30 pm, I would have to bed down for the night in the signal-box.

I put Train Control in the picture as to the weather outside and had a word with Templecombe, the box in advance and to the east of me,

K. Roberts

43. Collett 0–6–0 no. 3205 at Yeovil Junction on 4 March 1965, having come from Salisbury following an overnight snowstorm.

and they told me that they had opened up the siding points to let a goods train out, but could not get them to the normal position again. To top it all, the permanent way gang had gone home and few men would return to clear the snow. In bad weather it is the usual procedure for the signalman to work the lever frame at frequent intervals to free the wires and semaphore signals and prevent them from icing up. Around 9 pm I was carrying out this task but found that all my signals, with the exception of the up home signal, had frozen solid.

Ten o'clock came round and there was no bell signal for the 7.55 pm Salisbury–Yeovil Town down train which should have passed me at about 8.35 pm. The telephone was still in working order, so I was able to telephone Gillingham and was told that they had taken the people off the train and put on buses to take them to Yeovil, as Buckhorn Weston tunnel was blocked at both ends. When I asked Yeovil Junction A box of the whereabouts of the 8 pm Exeter–Waterloo via Eastleigh passenger and mail train, the signalman said it was just pulling into the station. I was in the act of telling him that the weather conditions were appalling when the electricity failed. This not only put the signal-box diagram out of action, but I was also without lights to see what I was doing. In a flash I opened up the stove and the glow from the fire gave me enough light to find the Tilley lamp, my emergency light.

It was about 10.30 pm when I got the 3 pause 1, 'Is line clear for a passenger train?', on the

K. Roberts

44. West Country Pacific no. 34048, 'Crediton', with snowplough at Sherborne on 4 March 1965.

block bells for the Waterloo train, and had to telephone the signalman at Sherborne to send the train up under caution. When it arrived at my up home signal I pulled the lever off and the train came ploughing into the station at a steady five to ten miles per hour, and came to rest at the up platform starting signal. I then telephoned Templecombe again to find out how long this train would be delayed, the answer being that only three of the permanent way gang had turned up, and it would be an hour at least before they could free the up siding points. With this news I called out to the engine crew to come into the box for a cup of tea. It was difficult not to laugh as the driver and fireman got down from the engine and sank chest deep in snow. They crossed over the down line and I could see them banging themselves like mad to clear some of the snow off before coming into the box. Even the driver and fireman went into fits of laughter as the guard, an old mate of mine, Harold Purse, got down from the rear end of the train on the offside and floundered through the snow as he walked the whole length of the train to join us.

Instead of the train clearing my section at approximately 10.35 pm, it was 12.50 am before it could make a move.

When Templecombe cleared back and both sections were clear, I gave the 'closing out' signals. This acknowledged, I laid my coat on the floor, using the seat cushion as a head rest, and settled down for the night.

The following day the snow around the station and on the railway lines gradually disappeared. I had spent the morning in Salisbury but in the late afternoon the roads were still blocked or in a dangerous condition, so I decided to stay after the late turn duty and drive home the following morning.

7
Alarms and Incidents

The most important item given to every man who joins the railway is the rule book, his personal property until he leaves the service.

Contained within thickly bound black covers, with its gold lettering, are rules and regulations for the safe operation of the railway. These rules cover the duties of all grades of porters, guards, firemen, drivers, permanent way staff, and so on. From this they are able to read and understand the code of behaviour that is required of every man. There is a description of various signals, their meaning and function, diagrams showing hand signals, the use of the red, yellow and green flags, as well as the train whistle and its meaning, the safety of permanent way men and the use of detonators for emergencies. The book also contains specimen wrong line order forms required to be completed by signalmen, guards and engine crews during failure of, or to operate, a block section of running line. The rule book is continually updated with amendments, taking into account any new situations arising from accidents and subsequent inquiries.

Despite the careful observance of safety regulations, coupled with the professionalism and dedication of railwaymen, things do sometimes go wrong, so I will mention some of the incidents that occurred during my thirteen years service, for such unforeseen moments remain vivid in my memory.

One day in April 1955 at Axminster, an up freight train, the 10.40 am from Exmouth Junction, was passing through. Standing out on the platform I could see one open wagon showering sparks from its wheels as the train came under the bridge used by the Lyme Regis branch line. Suddenly the nearside wheels dropped down onto the track, dragging over the sleepers. Just how these nearside wheels mounted the track again as it approached the up platform no one knew for sure. The wheel flange marks measured nearly 100 yards along the track bed.

The signalman at Axminster sent the emergency bell signal to Broom Gates signal-box, where the train was brought to a halt. Following an inspection, the train was allowed on to Chard Junction for the detachment of the faulty wagon.

During the sixth month of my service on the railway, and classified as a fully trained porter, I was asked one Saturday morning by Harold Purse, the station yard shunter, to handle a freight train for him, as he wanted to finish his duty early to participate in a football match that afternoon.

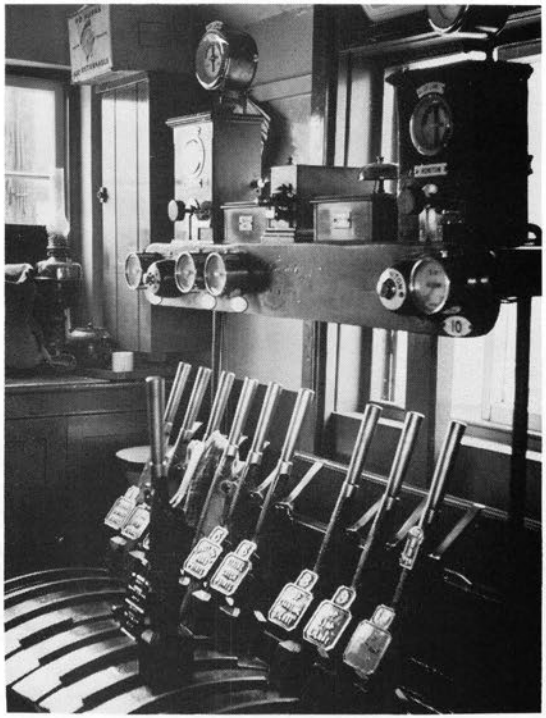
What Harold had not told me was that the train would be hauling open wagons full of cow bones! I know I must have looked funny with a handkerchief tied around my face and over my nose, because the smell was unbearable. I would have loved to have been up on the station

45. Templecombe lower yard in 1963 with a pannier tank on shunting work and S15 no. 30832 on a freight. In the right background permanent way work is in progress.

Dr G. R. Siviour

platform at that time, as I noticed a number of people either moving off the station or pinching their noses with their fingers!

Still at Axminster, the following incident was of a more serious nature. There must be many shunters who have had to detach a petrol tanker with a hot box from a train, so I thought it appropriate that I should record this, and although it appeared funny at the time, if the tank had blown up it would have been goodbye to me, together with half of Axminster station as well! This happened during April 1956 when the 10.40 am Exmouth Junction–Salisbury freight, normally non-stop through Axminster, was brought to a halt at the up home signal and I was sent for, to detach one 'NOT TO GO' wagon. The signalman on duty at the time said, 'It's up to you, Don, but that front offside wheel and box is red hot and could blow us all sky high.' Giving it some thought I said, 'If we leave it there all the rest could go up. I'll have a word with the driver.' By this time I could see the fireman running like mad towards me. Passing me by, he disappeared to somewhere out at the front of the station. The two engineers who should have come out to inspect the train could



W. Philip Conolly

46. The interior of Honiton Incline box, perhaps the loneliest on the SR. Signalmen became good friends with the mice! Oil lighting ruled until the end.

not be found. I did see the train guard leave his train as he made off across the down line, and I suppose he went into hiding behind the goods shed. The station was completely empty of people.

So it was down to the train for a word with the driver. He said, 'Steady mate, watch out and do be careful.'

It was a blessing at the time that all the petrol wagons did not have screw couplings, for these particular ones were loose coupled. (It was around this time that the first of the newer rolling stock, vacuum fitted and with screw couplings, began to appear in everyday use.) I could therefore break the train at the offending tanker quite easily. Sending the front portion clear of the up siding points, the signalman opened them up while I walked back some distance because of the heat. Reversing the engine, the driver kept the wagons on the move until we almost reached the stop blocks, and I dashed in quickly with the shunting pole. Separating the tanker, I sent the front portion back onto the main line and again got away from the heat. I signalled with my hand for the points to be returned to normal but nothing happened at first. The signalman had made off to a safe distance, but after a little while he returned. The train was recoupled and was on its way. Such are the emergencies that rarely reach the press.

Having personally experienced travel in a guard's brake van, I often wondered why the guards tolerated the snatching, rolling, and pitching from side to side. It always seemed an easy job sitting at the rear of a freight train until I was told of the following accident.

After Seaton Junction signal-box had switched out at midnight one night during September 1956, a down freight train was climbing the notorious Honiton bank, which has a rising gradient of 1 in 80, when it became divided. The rear portion stopped momentarily and then started to run away down the gradient. The subsequent inquiry showed that the guard had applied his van's brake and the vehicles were slowing up, but as they were approaching Seaton Junction he had jumped from the van to pin down some of the hand brakes. In jumping he had not reckoned with ground discs protecting the west to east crossover points. Unfortunately his body struck the ground disc and he died almost immediately. The rear portion of the divided train stopped only a few yards further on.

I can remember vividly the night of 23 October 1959 when a signalman at Axminster box named Wilf Hann collapsed and died in the course of his duty. That particular evening a

47. A down freight train, which has just cleared the catch points, nears the summit of Honiton bank. A signal engineer is working on the lower quadrant signal.

W. Philip Conolly

48. The new box at Crewkerne saw only five years active service. The late Fred Gibbs is in charge as a Warship diesel hydraulic passes with an up train diverted from the Western Region.

W. Philip Conolly

freight train had to be shunted into the down siding at Axminster. The guard had given the necessary shunt signal and the train was allowed to propel back into the yard. It was when Mr Hann realised the vehicles were travelling back into the wrong road that he opened the signal-box window to show a red hand lamp signal. Failing to stop the movement, he left the signal-box and ran towards the train. The movement stopped and he ran back to the signal-box. It was when he was climbing the steps that he had a heart attack, but no one was aware of this for some minutes. The first I knew was when the stationmaster, who had come out of his house, and a gentleman awaiting the arrival of the 6 pm from Waterloo, raised the alarm. On this particular day I had been taken away from my normal duties at Lyme Regis to act as a relief for station duties at Axminster, so I collected a

49. Yeovil Pen Mill in 1963. To the railwayman it hardly seemed possible that just a couple of years later these very yards would be virtually desolate following the Beeching axe.

John A. Plowman

shunt pole and made my way down to the yard while the booking clerk dashed over to the railway cottages to bring out the night signalman. Having split the train and given the shunt bell signal to close the main to yard points, I returned to the station.

In August 1963 news came through that there was flooding at Lavington, near Castle Cary on the Western's Paddington–West of England line, and all their trains were diverted to run between Exeter Central, Yeovil Junction and Yeovil Pen Mill, to Westbury, thence back onto the Western route and vice versa. Since this meant the use of the slip line between Yeovil Junction and Yeovil Town signal-boxes, Yeovil South Junction intermediate box was opened up to cover the diversionary line across to Pen Mill, and staffed by relief signalmen. At this time I was on relief to Crewkerne box.

John A. Plowman

50. Hendford Halt box which the author worked in during the severe winter of 1963.

The additional traffic really upset the Southern Region's summer working timetable, and so all freight working was cancelled. Every spare driver available was called out to act as a pilotman, and every Western train had to travel at reduced speed. At Crewkerne, owing to the volume of traffic, I had two waiting trains within the station limits. The first was at the up platform starting signal. It was no less than the Western's famous 'Cornish Riviera'. When the train stopped I could see the guard approaching

51. Hendford goods in 1963. It would appear that the pannier tank is waiting to make a shunt movement across the main line.

John A. Plowman

my signal-box. Knocking on the door and entering he said, 'Good day to you, officer. How long will my train be delayed?'

'Just a moment,' I replied, and lifted the telephone to speak to Yeovil Junction A box. I passed the delay time on to the guard, telling him that it would be several minutes, and he then thanked me. Before going back to his train I instructed him to countersign the train register book and informed him that I had protected his train by placing lever collars on the leading stop signal and the home signal. It was while the guard was returning to his train that I brought the approaching down train into the station limits under caution. Likewise, this was to be delayed as the section ahead was not clear. Looking at the nameplate on the front of the train it read 'Torbay Express'.

I suppose I can safely claim to be the only Southern Region signalman ever to have detained the running of two of the Western Region's most important passenger trains!

It was just after the very bad winter of 1963 that one of the most embarrassing situations occurred. This happened when I was relieving at Hendford Halt goods yard signal-box on the

52. GWR 2–6–2T no. 5563 and train arriving at Martock, one of the main glove producing towns in the country. This box was a most pleasant and interesting one to work.

R. C. Riley

Yeovil Pen Mill–Taunton line. The first down passenger train of the day was the 7.05 am ex Pen Mill due at 7.15 am. I received and acknowledged the block bell signal and held down the key of the train staff machine, and the train left Yeovil on time. On its approach to the down home signal and down siding shunt signal on the same gantry, it came to a halt. A couple of minutes went by before the fireman, carrying the staff, began to walk the 30 yards to the signal-box.

'Can't make enough steam, mate,' he said. 'Can you get another engine to take this lot on?'

I had a word with Train Control on the telephone and they suggested making use of the yard shunting engine, an 0–6–0 pannier tank. I told the fireman to uncouple his engine from the train, and noted that the guard went to the rear of the train with detonators for protection, in accordance with Rule No. 179. This done, I allowed the ailing engine into the down siding

which ran adjacent to the running single line. Making contact with the engine crew of the yard shunting engine, I allowed it out onto the running line and back onto the passenger train. Coupled up to the carriages it moved like a snail into the station platform. What now, I thought, as I saw the fireman of the new engine coming into the signal-box.

'Guess what?' he said. 'We can't get up enough vacuum to release the brakes properly.'

By this time the next station, Martock, was on the telephone to find out what was going on, and I had to spend a minute or so trying to put the signalman there in the picture. Speaking to Train Control for the second time, they informed me that a freight train was on its way down from Westbury to Pen Mill and that they would get the engine, 4–6–0, over to me as quickly as possible. Speaking to the fireman of the yard shunting engine, I told him to tell the guard to detrain the passengers and push the coaches back into the goods yard. The engine was then uncoupled from the carriages and allowed to cross the running line into the down siding to join the 7.15 am engine.

I thought at the time that with a bit of luck we would get the train through to Martock to let the 6.25 am Taunton–Pen Mill train come on. However, by this time the telephones were red hot as Train Control wanted to know what was happening. Other inquiries were being made by the signalmen of Yeovil Town and Martock signal-boxes.

After a brief spell Train Control 'phoned me back to say the goods train from Westbury had arrived at Yeovil Pen Mill and that its engine would arrive as soon as possible. I did not dare look across to the platform or open the signal-box window, as I had seen earlier about thirty people pacing up and down, becoming more and more impatient. I imagined that if I was to say the wrong word they would finish me off!

Half an hour was to go by before Yeovil Town signal-box asked 'Is line clear for light engine'. Acknowledged by myself, the light engine arrived after a few minutes within the station limits. Coupled up to the carriage stock the train was then sent on its way to Taunton.

Having opened up the signal-box, as it was getting hot inside, I was quick to close it up again as the train pulled out of the station. The driver was shaking his fist at me as he should have been on his way home. Such is the lot of a signalman.

Shortly after this, in June 1964, I was promoted to relief signalman class 1 and sent to Templecombe for training by the resident signalman. Here a misfortune befell a carriage shunter who had worked at the station for over twenty years. A fellow shunter came dashing into the signal-box and said his mate had been knocked down by an engine and was not moving. The signalman told him that he had better go and get Inspector Tolley who lived in one of the railway houses close by. I heard the full story when the inspector came into the signal-box to telephone Control at Exeter to report the incident. The carriage shunter, who was killed, had been changing a ground disc lamp, which had gone out, and replacing it with a lighted one.

On the theme of near misses and accidents, I was at Chard Junction signal-box during the summer of 1965 when a light engine was block signalled from Hewish. The signal was acknowledged. The 'phone rang almost immediately afterwards. George, the signalman at Hewish, said, 'Get those gates open early, Don, as this one is really moving.' Looking out of the signal-box window as the engine was coming towards me, I actually saw the engine's offside wheels leave the track for what seemed a couple of seconds just before it reached the crossing gates. Shaken by this, and as the West Country locomotive had been cleared through to Broom

W. Philip Conolly

53. Up passenger train at Hewish Gates, between Chard Junction and Crewkerne. The facing points for the down loop were worked electrically by a hand generator housed in the signal-box.

Gates signal-box towards Axminster, I took a walk out to the spot where the incident happened. Lo and behold, left there during the midday break was a track lifting jack belonging to the permanent way staff. Some forty minutes later the telephone rang. It was the driver of the light engine. When I explained what he had passed over, he let out some unmentionable words and said, 'I nearly died of fright.'

What could have amounted to a tragedy happened when I was posted out to the Crewkerne up distant signal on a night of thick fog when permanent way working was taking place in April 1967.

Armed with hand lamp and detonators I started my walk, but had to leave the path alongside the track and proceed by way of the roadway above Crewkerne tunnel. From there I needed to cross a field to find the deep cutting on the other side. By sliding down the bank in the right place I would finish up alongside the signal. In the thick fog I came to a stop as I felt

brickwork under my feet. With my raincoat and trousers soaking wet from the dew on the grass, I stopped to think for a moment, then near panic came over me as I realised that I was perched on the ledge over the railway tunnel. Digging in my heels and sliding sideways using my back and arms, I eventually got off the ledge onto the bank and so down to the signal.

It was usual for someone to come during the night to see if the fog signalman was all right and comfortable, but no one came. To cap it all, when the permanent way work had finished and normal working was resumed, I was still out by that signal for three hours afterwards. A goods train passing by stopped at Crewkerne signal-box and the Crewkerne gateman was sent out to tell me to come in.

On another occasion, a week before the 7 May 1967 changeover from double to single line was completed, what could have amounted to a major tragedy was averted by an observant motorist who came dashing into the signal-box at Crewkerne at the time I was on duty. He told me he could see a group of kids playing about on the line at the Hewish side of Crewkerne tunnel. They appeared to be putting bricks on the line and generally messing about on the top of the tunnel. Immediately I sent the 'obstruction danger' signal to the signal-box to my rear, Hewish Gates box. Telephoning the signalman to tell him what I was doing, I tried to make contact with the Crewkerne crossing gateman by telephoning, but received no reply. After contacting the police on the station telephone, I hurriedly made my way out towards Crewkerne tunnel. Arriving on the east side, I was met by the police who told me that the boys had run away fast and that they had moved the bricks away from the line. Back at the signal-box I cautioned the next train through and normal working was resumed.

Sometime after this incident, what was probably the same little gang of boys was involved in further mischief. They had the nerve to perch on the parapet of the road-bridge which crossed over the railway station at Crewkerne, and as an approaching down fast train passed through, they pelted the diesel locomotive with stones. They were off and away before I could get out of the signal-box, but this time the police caught up with them, causing trouble for them and their parents in the nearby village at Misterton.

In addition to my normal duties as signalman I was required to relieve the various crossing gates, and it was whilst I was on duty at Wyke crossing between Yeovil Junction and Sherborne in July 1967 that I received a shock as one of the summer holiday special trains was passing. Without warning a shower of electric light bulbs came hurtling towards me as I stood outside the gate box. Quick as lightning I telephoned Yeovil Junction signal-box, and was told that the train would be stopped at Crewkerne although it was booked as non-stop to Seaton Junction. On arrival at Crewkerne, I was later to learn that a party of twenty-five Boy Scouts were taken off the train by the police.

8
The Gradual Farewell

When I joined British Railways Southern Region in March 1955 there was talk even then of the Exeter–Salisbury line becoming electrified by use of the third rail – of course, it did not materialise. This was at a time when the railway began to develop the use of bulk train loads, and made a few special road/rail container wagons. Even with the improvements that were taking place, it appeared that traders in the West Country could not continue paying the ever increasing freight and parcels charges, plus demurrage payments regarding delayed, unloaded wagons. Firms such as Bradford & Sons, a large coal and builders merchants, had to withdraw its operation from a number of station goods yards, centralising its distribution methods. Silcocks, a well-known concern dealing with cattle feeding produce followed the same course. A Sidmouth firm who converted Volkswagen vans to caravanettes also ceased using the railway.

One meat carrying train which was to decrease in length, then cease altogether, was called the 'Tavy Special' which ran every evening to London from North Devon. All too soon one saw refrigerated lorries travelling along the A303 and A30 carrying meat that used to go by rail.

Likewise the Axminster carpet traffic, which had been handled by the railway for years, went on to the roads about the same time. The factory purchased a number of giant-sized lorries suitable for travel on the Continent. The shirt traffic which was dispatched from Crewkerne, and the glove traffic from Martock, Montacute and Yeovil, similarly left the railway for the roads. The Cornish flower and broccoli traffic, the fish from Mevagissey, the pigeon train traffic arriving on Fridays at Seaton and Exmouth – the birds being released in their hundreds on Saturday mornings – pebble traffic from Seaton, cow hides, timber and sugar beet, all these and many more were moved onto our overcrowded roads. Milk traffic was, of course, important on the Salisbury–Exeter line, but higher freight charges brought the giant milk tankers onto our West Country roads, so eventually Seaton Junction, Chard Junction and Semly, in whole or part, stopped sending their milk in bulk loads by rail.

I can even remember the last Bertram Mills Circus train which came to Yeovil Town. I am uncertain of the date, but it was just before the closure of the Yeovil–Taunton branch line on 13 June 1964. Before I started the 10 pm to 6 am duty at Yeovil Town, five trains had arrived during the afternoon and evening and were shunted into what was known as the long siding, nearly a mile in the direction of Hendford. After the passenger services for the day, three flat wagons at a time were brought forward and offloaded in the station goods yard. From the

R. C. Riley

54. Exeter Central B box – the first box up from Exeter St Davids, which received block bells from the WR box on one side and Exeter Central A on the other. One could not accept 'Line Clear' from St Davids until acceptance of 'Line Clear' from Exeter Central A, because of the very steep rising gradient with catch points. West Country Pacific no. 34003, 'Plymouth', is arriving with a train from Barnstaple.

signal-box I could see the marquee poles, cages with animals in them, including horses, lions and elephants, caravans and all manner of other equipment. There were men, women and children, all part of the circus, moving around like a well-trained army, but within three hours the station was quiet. The only person on station duty who did not receive a free pass to the first night's show was yours truly.

Of course, we were all worried by the 1963 Beeching proposals but fooled ourselves in the West Country that we should never see any alteration to the main line between Exeter and Salisbury, or the closing of its branch lines. However, the stark reality was to be thrust upon me one day in 1964 when, as a class 1 relief signalman, I was working in Yeovil Junction A box. In came the Chief Engineer from Reading Western Region and his entourage, accompanied by our local permanent way chief, to tell me about the changeover. The Salisbury–Exeter line and its branches would be taken over by the Western Region. Furthermore, the line would be a single one with a number of passing loops and most of the branch lines were to be closed. Redundancies were to start immediately. I received this news with deep sadness. It wasn't so much that I knew I would eventually be made

Derek Cross

55. Seaton Junction in 1959, with the Seaton branch on the left and S15 class 4–6–0 no. 30846 on an up freight. Note the superb permanent way and Honiton bank in the distance.

redundant, but I knew I would lose the many real friends I had made. In spite of the long hours away from home, the hard work and responsibilities of a relief signalman and general purpose man like myself, I had fallen in love with the job. Except for the different unions arguing over pay agreements, causing an occasional disruption to the normal passenger and freight services, everyone had a pride in his work that was recognised by the travelling public.

Eventually I learned that during 1967 most of the signal-boxes, apart from Exeter A box, Exmouth Junction, Pinhoe, Honiton, Chard Junction, Yeovil Junction A box, Templecombe (in part), Gillingham and Wilton South, would be done away with together with all the sidings, except part of Exmouth Junction, the permanent way siding at Honiton and two roads at Seaton Junction. So that the milk traffic from Seaton Junction Express Dairies could be continued, an electrical locking arrangement was instituted and linked to the block signalling system between Chard Junction and Honiton. This allowed the guard of the milk train, on its arrival at Seaton Junction, to switch into the circuit and free the locking of the facing points in the direction of Chard Junction. Once inside the

56. Interior view of Seaton Junction signal-box. Signalman Phare can be seen relaxing between train movements.

W. Philip Conolly

up sidings, it could be closed for the passing of passenger services. Shortly after this was instituted, however, the Dairy was moved to Honiton.

At Yeovil Junction all but one road in the down siding was to be kept for permanent way use. Most of the up sidings, with the exception of the engineer section, would be increased for the storage of rail materials and a wagon repair depot. The double line to Yeovil Town was done away with. In its place one line from the Junction across to Pen Mill was retained for the continuation of the lighter train service. Sherborne signal-box would be retained on a temporary basis until arrangements could be made for the crossing gates to be operated automatically. This box was closed on 4 January 1970. At the once busy Templecombe the up and down sidings were to disappear and the service between Evercreech Junction, Bath and Poole was to close. Arrangements were made for the

57. Yeovil Town MPD in August 1964 with plenty of activity, even after the closure of the Pen Mill–Taunton line in June.

John Scrace

former up line from Wilton South back to Chilmark sidings, a military storage depot, to be separate from the main line. The whole operation was to be carried out in three phases.

One particular Saturday, 3 May 1965, when I was working at Yeovil Town signal-box, a short time before its closure, a lump came to my throat. Opposite the signal-box was Yeovil Town loco depot. Around lunchtime I could see dozens of drivers, firemen and guards coming out from the depot rest room. Many had tears in their eyes and were not afraid to be seen like it. Some were slightly merry from drinking. In the middle of the yard a bonfire was belching black smoke into the air as dozens of rules and regulation books and other materials were being burnt, as the men filed past. In what seemed like only a few minutes the depot yard was quiet and empty. All the locomotives that had not already been sent for scrap were put out into the yard in a nice orderly fashion, as was the old steam driven crane which had served its purpose since the early 'thirties when it was built. On this sad day I did not see one photographer and I am glad it should have been this way. Later I was taken off most of the routine signal-box duties. First I went out and about with our Inspector Allan and Inspector Tolley, with the sole job of clipping and locking off any siding points from the main line. With the old crossover points taken out of use, the appropriate signal-box levers were disconnected to bring about the new single line with loop and passing places. The keys were signed for and retained in the signal-boxes until the points were dismantled.

A few days later we saw the arrival of three

58. Templecombe station with S15 class no. 30843 on an up stopping train on 7 September 1963. In the background 4F no. 44422 is on an S&D line train for Bournemouth West.

D. A. Idle

large diesel driven Matisa tamping machines. A grab-like piece of machinery beneath the machine raised a very small section of track and a spiked vibrator was lowered to loosen the ballast. The track was then released. Finally, using a special piece of equipment mounted on four wheels, the machine was pushed forward hydraulically for a few feet, with both a gradient and angle recording being made.

Later that same day two diesel engines coupled together hauled a whole load of new, long-length welded rail, plus a few empty Borail wagons. From Pinhoe station through to Wilton South a heavy programme of lifting the existing double lines, along with the cross-over points, was put into operation, and the new single line laid.

From then onwards my duties were varied, inasmuch as I might be asked to act as pilotman, look-out man or work a signal-box normally open for sixteen hours daily. For the most part almost all the permanent way work was done after 11 pm each night. The signal-box alterations to the new type of block system were carried out during the day. Also during the day the changeover from semaphore signals to electric light signalling, including the lever locking, was done. For a time, as the old block signalling equipment was dismantled, the signalmen at each end of a running section of line had to use the telephone only, and each train crew was so advised. The trains had to pass each crossing gate under caution as the relay bells were taken out, and the crossing gatemen had to act as look-out men as the signals which were originally installed were done away with. During the changeover as the crossing gatemen were made redundant, I, along with a couple of relief men, manned the gates as each one was converted to automatic barrier crossings.

As the main line took on its new shape and the

Hugh Ballantyne

59. Two class 33 diesels, D6566 and D6558, double-heading at Gillingham on the 8.50 am Brighton–Exeter train on 29 August 1970 after singling of the main line. Note that the original up line is being used in the down direction.

branch lines that we had come to love closed, many South West railwaymen received redundancy notices – station and yard staff, permanent way and signalmen – a sad time for us all. I in turn received mine, and was made redundant on 16 October 1968.

However, my last night of employment with British Rail was one I shall always remember. On Friday 15 October I was relieving in the signal-box at Chard Junction and it was during the early part of the day that it started to rain and turned out to be one of the heaviest downpours of the year.

After the 6.05 pm Exeter St Davids–Waterloo had passed through Honiton tunnel, the train came to a halt at my box and the driver reported that water was pouring down the bank at Blacksands bridge approximately two miles west of the former Seaton Junction station. At this time the 3.10 pm Waterloo–Exeter was running late, and so I was able to send the up train on to Yeovil Junction on the single line. With signals I brought the train up to my box to inform the driver of the situation and to proceed under caution on his approach towards the bridge and the tunnel. The train went on to Honiton and the news came back to me that conditions were not bad.

At about the time the 8.10 pm Exeter–Basingstoke was booked to make its passenger

60. Warship class D827, 'Kelly', at Gillingham, travelling towards Salisbury with a Waterloo train on 29 August 1970.

Hugh Ballantyne

stop at Honiton station, this being the last up train of the day, no one was available to go out and inspect Honiton tunnel. As the rain was still pouring down I telephoned the Honiton signalman to say that when the 8.10 pm train arrived at his station he should have the engine detached and ask the train crew to have a look at the east side of the tunnel before the train itself proceeded. Later I received a call that the driver was going to bring his train through under caution since the water had built up almost to the level of the ballast. But as the train cleared the tunnel a part of the cutting slope to Blacksands bridge broke away and the train ploughed right through it. The driver of the up train said the impact must have frightened his passengers, but more so the learner driver with him, who at the time was leaning out of the door of the diesel to inspect the line!

I told Control at Exeter of the situation and all trains were stopped from coming into the section from Honiton to Chard Junction. Many a person was to curse that night, as arrangements had to be made for the passengers travelling on the 5 pm and 7.10 pm trains from Waterloo to be ferried by buses to complete their journeys westwards. Even now I have no idea where the buses came from, but five turned up at Chard Junction and people from the 5 pm from Waterloo were detrained with their luggage to continue their travels.

With Chard Junction being a crossing loop, I was able to leave the empty train in the down loop and have the 7.10 pm from Waterloo sent on. Likewise this train was emptied of its passengers who joined three buses which had travelled all the way from Exeter to help out.

Now all that is past, but travelling as a passenger today I have often stood on a station imagining the arrival of a West Country or Battle of Britain Pacific amidst a haze of sulphuric smoke, and seen again the driver leaning out of the cab to measure the stopping distance within the platform length, the brake shoes pressing hard against the wheels as the train draws finally to a halt.

Or I have imagined myself looking down from a signal-box to see a dozen or more people leaving or boarding a train at stations now perhaps just a grass covered mound beside the track. I remember how, during hot or cold weather in the old manually worked boxes, I was forever tightening or loosening the ratchets that compensated the pull on the signal levers. How I worried when a train was overdue after it had passed the previous signal-box to me on time!

More than anything else, though, I recall the good friends I made, and the natural sense of purpose and responsibility in going about our day to day duties, which might vary from issuing a 'wrong line order' when engineering work was taking place, to the struggle of making up a freight train in driving rain and high wind. Despite the occasional hardships, and the long hours worked during adverse weather conditions, I enjoyed every minute of my time as a South West railwayman.

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